THE EGYPTIAN THEATRE

Cultural Encounters 2

by

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G.E.B.O

Dedication

For M. Enani ...

the most important encounter

in my life

PREFACE

What happens to plays when presented in cultural contexts other than their own? – to dramatic texts in translation, or when adapted to suit a different culture? How are they approached by directors and perceived by spectators? What expectations do audiences bring to them, or to visiting performances in alien languages? How are these expectations formed? through what agencies? and how do they affect reception?

These questions, indirectly addressed through concrete, eyewitness reports on specific productions, local and otherwise, of foreign plays, are the focus of the present work which covers a wide range of intercultural theatrical events in Egypt and the Arab world over the period from 1993 to 2004. In many cases, the productions are compared to earlier ones, establishing telling comparisons, or the history of a particular foreign text or author on the Egyptian stage is briefly sketched to provide background information to a particular production. This helps to expand the temporal scope of the book beyond the specific period it covers without making any claims to a comprehensive coverage of the subject.

There is no claim to absolute objectivity either, if such a thing is at all possible. The accounts of the intercultural theatrical events covered here were processed through my own perception and are, therefore, inevitably coloured by my own experience, cultural background, cast of mind and ideological predilections. There is in them, however, or so I hope, enough objective information, description and assessment to correct the balance.

For convenience, the material was divided between two volumes (one would have been too bulky) and arranged both geographically and chronologically. A side-benefit of this arrangement is the insight it provides into the intensity, range and direction of the encounters with foreign drama in the period covered.

What we term modern Egyptian theatre was born out a cultural encounter with Europe, its dramatic and theatrical traditions, and ever since, its course has been influenced and partially shaped by constant exposure to other cultural/theatrical practices. Hopefully, this will continue to be the case.

Nehad Selaiha
Cairo, 2004

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At the Wallace Theatre, Egyptians and foreigners are once more working together and producing a thrilling theatrical experience. Director Walter Eysselinck was very wise to entrust the roles of the aged couple, Willy Loman and his wife Linda, to two professional actors of suitable age. Student actors can be very talented of course, but some parts lie completely outside their range of experience due to their age. Tom Glynn and Mary Starnes gave two magnificent and deeply moving performances, handling the characters with sensitive sympathy and profound understanding. They gave expression to the subtlest of nuances and the most fleeting of moods and without a single false note or a hint of sentimentality brought home to us the suffering of this family and its harrowing sense of disillusionment. Like two maestros, they orchestrated the emotional tone and rhythm of the piece and brought out its latent poetry. The simple dignity, honesty and restraint of their acting infected the rest of the cast and informed, in different degrees, their performances. Sari El-Naggar was in top form and thoroughly convincing as Biff, and Mohamed Rustum, Ibrahim El-Missiri, Pascale Ghazaleh, Hazem Azmy and the rest were at their best.

Eysselinck's direction was singularly uncluttered with not a single prop, gesture or movement in excess or out of place. Despite the two-level set by Abdallah El-Ayouti, the stage had an empty, forlorn look which suggested Loman's state of mind and sense of loneliness

* 25.11.1993. In English.

and desolation. The lighting, designed by Akram Khadr helped also in this respect, giving the whole play a dream-like quality which weakened the barriers between past and present, memory and reality and dissolved all places into one waste land, populated by shadows, where Loman wanders like a lost soul. This was a show of great dignity, integrity and austerity, one that the Theatre Company of the AUC can truly and unreservedly be proud of; it also confirms the wisdom of the policy of bringing in competent professional actors to participate in the company's work side by side with students and graduates.

Watching *Death of a Salesman* convinced me of the great contribution foreign cultural bodies in Egypt can make to Egyptian life and art. It has also confirmed my already firm belief that the few bigoted chauvinists who regard such contribution as a form of cultural invasion are nothing but a deluded bunch of idiots. In these repressive days, with the budget for the arts ever shrinking, we need as much cultural as economic foreign aid, perhaps even more.

Carry on Doctor

Niel Simon's *The Good Doctor* at AUC*

In the sixties, we all loved Chekhov, liberals and socialists, Right, Left and middle-of-the-road. His works were widely available in English and Arabic and you could get a fat volume of his short stories at El-Sharq Bookshop downtown for literally a handful of piastres. For the budding, literary talent, he was almost compulsory reading and for the aspiring dramatist an absolute must. Indeed, since the fifties, a whole generation of playwrights had been assiduously following in his footsteps, cultivating the poetry of the trivial and the mundane. And in the critical jargon of the day, 'Chekhovian' was a term of the highest praise. Nor were his plays away for long from the boards: in the space of three years, I remember watching a triple-bill of Chekhovian farces at El-Hakim theatre (now Mohamed Farid), a superb production of *Uncle Vanya* by the National for which a Russian director by the name of Leslie Platon was flown all the way from Moscow to assist the late Egyptian director Kamal Yassin, and a four-hour production of *The Cherry Orchard* by the Moscow-trained director Naguib Sorour, starring the redoubtable Amina Rizq.

The seventies witnessed the ebbing of the Chekhovian tide: the National made a brave attempt to revive *The Seagull*, with Aida Abdel Aziz as the vampirish Madame Arkadena, but the production folded up after only three weeks, and when Samir El-Asfouri, shortly afterwards, adapted the short story *Ward No. 6* for El-Tali'a theatre (around 1979),

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* 19.5.1994. In English.

renaming it *The Mad Cell*, it struck many as the elegiac swan-song of a whole period. It was not until last year that we got a glimpse of Chekhov once more on the Egyptian stage, in Tawfiq Abdel Latif's reworking of the one-actor *Swan Song* at the Hanager Centre; but what a murky, blurred glimpse that was!

It was, therefore, with something approaching joy that we, Chekhov's fans, received the news of the AUC's production of Neil Simon's *The Good Doctor*. It may not be pure, unadulterated Chekhov, but it is certainly better than no Chekhov at all. What is more, it turned out to be a good production, rewarding in almost all respects. The gentle presence of Chekhov could be felt everywhere, not only in his fictional persona, episodes and characters – superbly rendered by the students – but also in the sophisticated simplicity of the sets and costumes and the subtle economy of movement and gesture, even in the most farcical of anecdotes. Of humour, there was plenty, broad and raucous or elegantly muted, but always with a hint of something deeper and sadder behind.

Mohamed Rustom Aidi, as Chekhov – the narrator who links the episodes which make up the show and orchestrates them into a coherent tonal pattern – rendered the character beautifully in all its variant moods. He established an immediate rapport with the audience and his presence was warm, charming, extremely vivid and thoroughly unassuming. His emotional restraint, too, was quite admirable, and in his gentle quiet manner he managed to communicate, in subtle ironical inflections, something of the tragic sense that informed Chekhov's life.

The rest of the actors were uniformely competent with the occasional sparkle here and there. Amr Faisal Nada in his debut

appearance at the AUC was an enchanting surprise but he has yet to learn to be articulate even when at the highest pitch of passion or when delivering his lines *allegro furioso*. Abeer El-Sharqawi, too, was in her best form and gave a memorable performance. As the cool, unconsciounable mistress, she was, aptly, infuriatingly wicked. And how can anyone forget Dina El-Saleh who played both the submissive governess and the insufferably obstreperous Madame Schukin with the captivating freshness of a debutante and the confident ease of a long-standing professional.

But satisfying as the show was, one cannot help feeling that it could have been better, if only director Walter Eysselinck had juggled around a little with the arrangement of the scenes. In each of the two parts which make up the evening, one episode seemed to strike a false note and to cry out to be shifted to the other part where it would be much more thematically at home. It is true that on the surface the play looks episodic and erratically pieced together from scattered bits of Chekhovian material. But in fact, each of the two parts of the play has a central theme and a distinctive emotional palette. In the former, the setting is the arena of public life and the theme is power, played out in many social variations: the power of the writer over his audience, of the ruthless audience over the entertainer, of the employer over the employee, of the doctor over the patient and of the system over the individual. In the middle of this, the musical episode 'Too late for happiness' struck an odd note. It should have been replaced by 'A Defenseless Creature' from the second part and taken its place there. For in the second part, we move to a more personal and private area where the social conflict gives way to an existential one and where the shadows of tragedy play around the edges. The suffering we come

across in Act One is real enough (despite its clownish mask) but it is socially curable; it is what Ernst Toller described as the "unnecessary suffering ... which arises out of the unreason of humanity, out of an inadequate social system." In the second act, however, there is a different type of suffering, "the lonely suffering imposed upon mankind by life and death;" and it is this "tragic element of life", in Toller's words, which forms the background to 'The Seduction,' 'The Audition,' and 'The arrangement' in the second act, and also to the 'Too late for Happiness' episode which was mistakenly placed in the first. Still, what a wonderful evening the good doctor Chekhov and the good Dr. Eysselinck have given us!

The Player is the Thing

Albee's *Three Tall Women* at the Opera House*

When the auditorium lights dimmed at the small hall of the Opera House last Wednesday to announce the beginning of the ART visiting production of Edward Albee's *Three Tall Women*, I experienced the delicious sensation, rare nowadays, of being 'with it', in on the latest thing. Instead of reading about this 1994 Pulitzer Prize winning play in the American Press and waiting for it for months or years to trickle down to us in book form, there we were, about to watch a live performance of it by a reputable American company (albeit a regional one). Those New Yorkers who flock to see it at the Off-Broadway Promenade Theatre are, after all, no better off than us, even though in our case it was a one-night event. For nearly two hours it felt as if Cairo was no longer one of the world's cultural backwaters – a gratifying illusion for which we have to thank the American Cultural Centre.

Not that the play itself is something world-shaking; having seen it, I begin to suspect that a certain sense of guilt towards the writer on the part of the American critical establishment and a desire to rehabilitate him and make up for the long years of terrible neglect had something to do with the choice. Indeed, one American critic bemusedly wondered (in the April 18 issue of *Variety*) why some far worthier plays like Tony Kushner's *Perestroika* (the second part of last year's Pulitzer winner *Angels in America*) or Anna Deavere Smith's *Twilight: Los Angeles 1992* were passed over by this year's drama jury? The fact (tiresomely dwelt on by many American reviewers) that Albee, now 66, wrote

* 20.10.1994. In English.

Three Tall Women (as he acknowledged) in part to exorcise his own ill feelings against his adoptive mother who kicked him out of home at 18 for his homosexuality and later cut him off from her will (after nearly 26 years of estrangement) hardly seems an explanation.

True the play, not infrequently, evokes memories of earlier (and far greater) achievements like *The Zoo Story*, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*, *A Delicate Balance* or *The American Dream*; there is in it enough of the typically Albean savage humour and cynical wit, and it shares their epigrammatic predilection and unrelievedly bleak view of human life and relationships. Yet, in terms of structure, it falls far behind. In fact, *Three Tall Women* is built on technical chicanery — an abrupt and arbitrary switch in dramatic procedure from a naturalistic to a quasi-expressionistic style designed to disguise the essentially monologic structure of the play and give the illusion of dramatic development through dialogue. After a straightforward realistic first act where we see the wreck of a domineering, bigoted 92-year old woman attended in her sumptuous bedroom by a middle aged nurse and a young lawyer, and listen to her almost uninterrupted senile ramblings on the past, which only stop when she has a stroke (which mechanically brings the act to an end), we get a second act where the same three women appear in the same setting, but this time representing three different phases of the old hag's life – 26, 52 and 80 onward – with stylish clothes to match. Visibly on the bed, a dummy represents the body (now a corpse) that once housed them all.

The dialogue that follows continues the monologic revelations of the first act, adding little to the original picture, and frequently slipping into pompous, platitudinous generalisations about life ("It's downhill

from 16 on for all of us") masquarading as deep philosophical insights. What excuses them is the beauty of Albee's prose, its rhythm and cadences. But no amount of beautiful prose or pungent wit or scabrous humour could hide the basically static nature of the drama or mend its cracked structure; nor did the bold technical gimmick of splitting the one woman into three selves provide a rich, cubist, multiple perspective as Albee had possibly hoped.

One of the puzzling but familiar ironies of theatrical life is that good productions and performances do not always require or necessarily depend on good texts; and the ART's production of *Three Tall Women* provided fresh proof of that. The actresses who undertook the titular parts (JoAnn Johnson, as Woman A, Vana O'Brian, as Woman B, and Raissa Fleming, as the youngest Woman C) gave riveting performances, warm and vibrant and masterfully controlled in their complex tonal variety and subtle gestural patterns. They managed the change from their characters in Act One to those in Act Two with remarkable skill and sensitivity. Psychologically and physically, they felt, looked and sounded different, and in the case of Johnson and O'Brian, in particular, it seemed like a magical metamorphosis. Nevertheless, they managed to preserve enough significant traces of the nonagenarian woman of the first act (her petulance, quick temper, sense of humour, resilient strength, sensuous love of luxury and passionate resentments) to make the two halves of the play appear, at least for the duration of the performance, coherent.

That director Jon Kretzu, who has a solid background in classical music, conceived of the production (as the actresses mentioned in an open discussion after the show) as a piece of chamber music for violin,

cello and piano, may partly account for such coherence and the pronounced harmonious quality of the show. But he also allowed the actresses (by their own admission) plenty of room for individual and group creativity. Watching their finely tuned ensemble performance, one cannot help feeling that what they contributed to the play out of their own personal experience and intuitive sympathy has helped bridge many an awkward textural gap and plaster over many a crack. With actresses such as O'Brian, Johnson and Fleming, one needs little else, and, indeed, David Sherma's set and lighting were hardly noticable and soon forgotten.

The high calibre of the acting in *Three Tall Women*, however, came as no surprise. At the same venue, on the previous evening, the ART players had given their Cairene audience ample proof of it in their rollicking revue *A Journey Through American Comedy*. Farcical, parodic, ribald and lyrical by turn, the show progressed (or, rather, hurtled along) at a frenzied pace in the manner of a zany strip-cartoon-cum-crazy-silent-movie spoofing romance, sex and marriage. The sheer number and variety of the items carefully culled from the rich storehouse of American comedy was virtually dizzying and it left the actors but seconds to change gear and constumes and slip out of one character and into the next. Apart from their vocal and physical versatility and technical virtuosity, their sheer stamina and energy were at once daunting and exhilarating. In addition to the magnificent trio that played *Three Tall Women*, we were treated here to the wizardly talents of Beth Harper, Duffy Epstein and Allen Nause (who also directed *A Journey*, plus playing the silent part of the son in *Three Tall Women*).

As the show progressed, the bounds of logical expectations and commonsense exploded into showers of sparkling humour and barbed

wit, and the familiar linguistic machinery seemed to go haywire, plunging its users into total confusion. In the world of *A Journey*, no signifier seemed able to hold on to its signified for long; when not playing truant, leaving a void or another in its place, the signified showed an irritating habit of expanding, dividing and proliferating, or dressing itself in borrowed robes. Yet, despite the uniform hilarity of the show, some sketches (particularly the scenes from Divid Ives' *Sure Thing*, Neil Simon's *Broadway Bound* and *Plaza Suite* and Robert Anderson's raucously funny and deeply perceptive *I'm Herbert*) seemed to reach beyond the surface glitter towards some serious insights into the nature of human discourse, experience and even consciousness. The barriers between truth and lies, experience and memory, the factual and the imagined and even the self and the other are revealed as dangerously tenuous and vulnerable; in old age, however, they are likely to become completely blurred, mingling and melting everything into one huge fiction. The old couple in *I'm Herbert*, superbly played by Vana O'Brien and Allen Nause, who (both) incredibly seemed to age thirty years or more in two minutes, slip and slide between characters from the past, fighting all the while to hang on to their identities (or their memories of such identities) and finally give up, embracing all the remembered identities to themselves, with all their moments of happiness.

That an unpretentious comic collage like *A Journey* should have more philosophical depth and stirring insights (if only in places) than a self-confessedly serious drama, and a Pulitzer prize winner at that, is surely a sobering and humbling thought. And, who knows? May be that was the ultimate message and destination of this frolicsome *Journey*. Sadly, it lasted only one night and ended all too soon.

Perfect Crime

Beth Henley's *Crimes of the Heart* at the AUC*

Playing Willey Loman in Walter Eysslinck's production of Miller's *Death of a Salesman* over a year ago, Tom Glynn, who had recently joined the AUC staff, gave his performance a distinctly Chekovian feel and ring. In his hands, the character grew gentler, more fragile, acquiring an air of wistful innocence, of painful hesitancy and child-like confusion. Loman's coarseness and vulgarity were played in a lower key and his silly bravados were toned down so that behind the loud blusterings you could almost catch the faint echo of a soft whimper. Imperceptibly, through his subtle art, and perhaps with the collusion of the director, Glynn moved the play closer to Chekov's world and Loman strongly evoked his uncle Vanya.

Not surprisingly then, when Glynn decided to direct a play for the AUC theatre company he chose a text with a pronounced Chekovian flavour. Beth Henley's *Crimes of the Heart*, which won her a Pulitzer for drama in 1981, is almost a reworking of Chekov's *Three Sisters* in a contemporary American setting — a kind of sequel that transposes Chekov's Olga, Masha and Irena in place and time and traces their fortunes a few years on. One could easily imagine the spinster Olga turning into the dowdy Lenny and seeking a blind date through a lonely hearts corner, or the unhappily married Masha committing adultery and shooting her silly teacher husband as Babe does, or Irena leaving home in pursuit of hope and fulfillment and coming back, like Meg, sadly disillusioned.

* 12.1.1995. In English.

Like Chekov, Henley presents us with characters frustrated in their deeper purposes, but she carefully avoids sentimentalising or romanticising them. Her compassionate portraits consistently mix the ludicrous with the tragic and are never devoid of humour. The feeling-tone of the characters and their shifting, elusive emotional reactions to one another, to the pressing events and to their surroundings are conveyed with a subtle economy through seemingly haphazard dialogue. And it is in this respect that Henley comes closest to Chekov. Despite a complex melodramatic plot which involves a suicide, an attempted suicide, a shooting, an imminent death, a failed career, insanity, betrayal, desertion and an old vendetta, what occupies the foreground are the fluctuating moods of the characters and the modulations of their relationships. What remains firmly of interest to us throughout is the growing affectionate bond between the sisters, their gradual rediscovery of each other and their deepening intimacy. In this sense, preparing coffee or a jug of lemonade, nibbling at a box of chocolates or an apple, putting curlers in one's hair, sharing a joke, airing old, petty resentments, exchanging confidences, reminscing about old times or ordering a birthday cake from the nearby bakery become more significant events than adultery or attempted murder. That is why when the play, which opens with Lenny celebrating her birthday solo and lighting a single candle on a small biscuit, ends with the three sisters blithley diving into a huge cake, we are not irked by the fact that nothing has been resolved, that the plot has been left in mid air.

Glynn's production successfully captured the mood of the play and focused its main interest. In sharp contrast to the violent events we hear about, Mohamed Hamed Ali's kitchen set had a warm, cosy look. Not infrequently, however, his lighting imbued this comforting, intimate

atmosphere with an autumnal mood of melancholy. The acting, except in the case of Sahar Nasser who deliberately and rightly overplayed the brashness of Chick (a caricature of the typical nagging, interfering chatterbox), had a quality of studied coolness and casualness about it. There was no hint of melodrama any where and the most devastating confessions were played for comic effects, or delivered with an even neutrality of tone that made them devastatingly funny. Glynn elicited superb performances from Nevine El-Koshairy as Lenny, Magda Abdou as Meg and Rasha El-Saleh as Babe. They formed a wonderfully orchestrated ensemble, with many rich, subtle variations and delightful counterpoints, and convincingly bodied forth on stage that rare sense of intimacy that only exists between real siblings. Amr Wakid's Doc may have been excessively pale and Craig Bardsley's Barnette could have been less wooden and pompous; but *Crimes*, nevertheless, remains an immensely satisfying theatrical experience. Watching it, I felt I never wanted it to end, and I can't think of a better tribute for a show. To Glynn, his cast and crew, my thanks are long overdue: their *Crimes* was the best Xmas gift I got this year.

A Local *West Side Story*

Among Other Things*

By the time this is published, all of Cairo's theatres, state-run or private, will have dimmed their lights and barred their gates in honour of Ramadan. This practice has gone on for years, as if to give credence to the bigots' claim that theatre is an anti-religious activity. Admittedly, since the grand downhill slide began, many of our theatres have managed the admirable feat of transforming themselves into sleazy nightclubs; but to brazenly admit it by closing their doors during the ascetic month of fasting brands the whole profession. Our poor actresses, some of them too dim-witted to cope with the tangle of moral paradoxes this hypocritical situation poses, and weighed down by a long tradition of male sexual exploitation, are left with three choices: to stay at home growing fatter and, hopefully, wiser; to strive to attain the much coveted status of belly dancer; or to abscond to the rival television camp — that is if years of slovenly theatrical practice have not worn them down and out. No wonder many of them end up wearing the veil or channelling their energies into other, more lucrative, pursuits.

It is not that I regret the closures; in fact, and to be absolutely honest, I have a sense of relief. They give me time to digest some of the trashy junk food I forced down my long-suffering throat last week. Guarding against the prospect of a whole theatrically arid month, not withstanding our theatres' slatternly aesthetics, and despite the promise of a new play by Karam Metaweh at Al-Hanager Centre, the only

* 2.2.1995. In Arabic.

theatre to remain open in Ramadan, most unwisely, I crammed three shows into one week.

The first, which I took by way of an appetizer, seemed a disastrous *hors d'oeuvres*, that is until I came to the main course; but *Lil Amam Qif* (Forward, Halt), compared to Galal El-Sharqawi's version of *West Side Story*, seemed a jewel in retrospect. In the former we had Soheir El-Morshidi, after a long absence, agonising over her lot as forlorn widow of a war martyr. And since the martyr in question, in Nabil Badran's text, was no one less than Gamal Abdel-Nasser himself, El-Morshidi was automatically catapulted by the text into the status of patriotic symbol. For over an hour, we saw her, in a set hung about with various multi-coloured items of clothing, with a shattered TV set descending from the flies every now and then, lamenting the ingratitude of the nation, guarding her husband's medals and his Neanderthal-looking poly-styrene bust. The peace accord with Israel is equally bewailed and so is the tide of religious fundamentalism. Poor Egypt, in the figure of El-Morshidi, is raped at the end and robbed of her martyr's medals. The show, despite El-Morshidi's captivating presence and Sami Maghawri's cheeky impersonations of all the negative stereotypes of the Sadat era, felt like a lump in the throat. It took several glasses of orange juice from a small shop opposite Al-Salam Theatre to wash it down, plus innumerable cups of coffee afterwards over many days.

West Side Story, however, proved most resistant to all known digestive measures. The night I was there film star Farid Shawqi was present to supervise the writhing, wiggling abilities of his daughter. Nicknamed 'the King' in cinematic circles, he presided over the auditorium in the front row to browbeat the critics present into an

acquiescent tolerance of Rania Farid Shawqi's behaviour on stage. Her performance as the loose-haired, slightly flashy Puerto Rican Anita in the original Arthur Laurents' script, made us feel as if we were in for a belly-dancing competition between her and Abeer El-Sharqawi as Maria. What made it worse was that the two young ladies were atrociously dressed in the most horridly cacophonous combination of colours. All the efforts of musician Nabil Ali Maher and choreographer Atif Awad were wasted on the two young ladies. At the end, what saved the purloined show, which ultimately looked like a horrendous adulteration of an originally insipid show (despite Leonard Bernstein's music and Stephen Sondheim's lyrics), was film star Hisham Abdel-Hamid. Indeed, whenever he appeared on stage, he made us feel as if we were watching a different play.

The race issue here was replaced by the class issue and the story of the much sinned-against Romeo and Juliet was re-enacted in terms of a conflict between Zamalek and Bulaq, with the poor Abul-Ela bridge, reduced to a foot-bridge by the stage designer, figuring prominently in the set. This ludicrously farcical approximation of the well-known film lasted for four and a half hours and the boredom drove me to tears. But nothing, in terms of plain insipidity, could compare with *Intu Fein Ya Arab* (Where Ara You Arabs?). Here, a burly singer bores you to tears at the beginning, singing in horridly lugubrious tones about Arab unity and the beloved homeland. When Wagdi El-Arabi appears in the role of a deranged, idealistic citizen who thinks that he can achieve Arab unity by inviting all the Arab kings and presidents to his humble abode in Cairo (translated into an unsightly set with so many blocks bearing a blood-red map of the Arab world), you breathe a sight of relief. But from then on nothing happens. The burly singer keeps obtruding every

half minute to repeat, in lyrical terms, what Mr Arabi had just said. And since what Mr Arabi says does not amount to much more than a layman's obsequious repetition of official government statements, you wonder why the author simply didn't save himself the trouble and write an article of sonorous applause to the government.

Of theatrical art there was nothing last week. What there was was a heap of insipid verbiage. It will take more than a month of fasting to digest.

Terpsichorean Fever

The Alvin Ailey dancers at the Opera House*

It is always a bad sign when you find yourself able to be glib about dance theatre. In essence, dance strives to encompass what language cannot; it is, as the great modern dance pioneer, Martha Graham, once said "another way of putting things. It isn't a literal or literary thing;" its meanings cannot be said in words. Any verbal description of a dance performance is bound to be reductive, especially when it explores what Graham calls the "interior landscape inside the body." One can write extensively about movement and compositional patterns, map out the general conception, spout impressive rhetoric on "the expressive function of dance through an address to the essentials of choreographic form", or — the final *reductio ad absurdum* of criticism — turn into a scorekeeper counting up *entrechats*, *plies*, and *arabesques*. But however much you try to chase the essence or the nature of the impact of a dance performance, in the best of them and the ones truest to the medium, something illusive always remains, tantalisingly resistant to critical analysis and convenient classification.

And perhaps it is just as well. If you had told the rapturous audiences who packed the main hall of the Opera House during all the performances of the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theatre between 24 and 29 September that the distinction of the troupe was attributable to its ingenious mixing of modern and traditional dance techniques with the unique modes of black cultural expression, they could not have cared

* 3.10.1996.

less. Even the most knowledgable among them, the connoisseurs who know all about the history and development of modern dance and could decipher with relish the technical intricacies of the choreographic composition and its thrilling innovations and departures from the beaten track, would have been at a loss how to explain the overwhelming sense of life and energy that flowed from the stage, particularly during the performance of *Cry* and *Revelations* — both choreographed by the Great Ailey himself.

Admittedly, not all the works offered in the two different programmes were of equal merit or achieved the same effect. In all of them the dancers displayed the same technical virtuosity, admirable physical discipline and emotional involvement; but in the best of them – or at least my personal favourites which include *Rainbow 'Round My Shoulder'* (1959), choreographed by Donald McKayle, and *Suite Otis* (1971), for which George Faison designed the choreography and costumes, besides *Cry* and *Revelations* of course — the 'interior landscape' revealed in movement had a richer complexity of feeling and variety of mood and a passionate sense of urgency. It felt at times as if the passion of the dancers was about to burst through their bodies and drown the auditorium; the mood could be exultant or sad, humourous or tragic, but always, at every point, there was that sense of celebration and overpowering vitality. May be that is why I found the many blackouts and intermissions particularly disconcerting: they felt like a sudden interruption in a torrential flow.

At the end of the final performance of the troupe last Sunday, and after the deafening applause had continued for over five minutes, the legendary Judith Jamison, for whom Alvin Ailey had originally

designed the *tour de force* solo *Cry*, and who is currently the artistic director of the troupe, appeared from the wings. At once I caught my breath and could see no one else; I thought I was seeing a tall and graceful magical palm tree treading the boards, an African palm, and found myuself murmuring 'welcome home'. I also realized that I shall die regretting that I had never seen her in a live performance of *Cry*. The recorded performance communicates a lot; but it is only when you see her that you realize the full force of her charismatic presence and personality. For this rare and valuable experience, I, with many others will be eternally indebted to the American Centre for Press and Cultural Affairs, the Cairo Opera House and all the co-sponsors who helped bring the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theatre to Cairo.

A Thespian Bonanza
at the AUC*

Do you remember the blistering sand storm which ripped through Cairo on March 15? Maybe you don't. But for all the budding playwrights at the AUC that day will always be memorable. Not on account of the storm as you may think — though storms have always inspired dramatists, even the Khamaseen sand storms — but because on that day it was announced that Egyptian playwright Mohamed Salmawy had donated an annual award for playwriting in his name to the new "Famous for 15 Minutes New Plays Festival" launched by the AUC Department of Performing and Visual Arts on 12 March at Howard theatre. It consisted of five new 15-minute plays presented in one programme on the opening and closing nights, plus staged readings of three more new plays on the 14th. It officially ended 15 March with the awards ceremony, held after the final performance, and the announcement of the winner of the Salmawy award. However, the five new playlets proved so popular that an extra, unscheduled performance had to be given on the following day in response to public demand.

The festival is the brainchild of Tori Haring-Smith, the artistic director of the AUC Department of Performing and Visual Arts, and involves more than the mere vetting and staging of new plays. It is primarily concerned with developing the skills of emerging playwrights in workshops where they can, in Haring-Smith's words, "hear their words read, get reactions to their scripts, and consider ways of

* 16.4.1998. In English and Arabic.

developing them." Why the 15 minute limit? Because, she explains, it "allows an in-depth, intensive look at one idea, much like a poem." Admittedly, this gives the project an educational slant; but what saves it from being simply a practical course in creative writing is that it does not limit itself to students; it involves graduates, members of staff, and visiting artists in the workshops as well. It also brings together people from different generations, countries, cultural backgrounds and stages of experience and maturity — very much like an international, multi-cultural theatre workshop. It is a laudable, impressive, and creatively ambitious project, and I was deeply frustrated when the storm, which reduced visibility to near zero around The Academy of Arts where I was teaching that afternoon, plus my irritatingly sensitive eyes (which, like Othello's, decided on that occasion to "drop tears as fast as the Arabian trees their medicinal gum") prevented me from making the awards ceremony. But fortunately, I caught the last performance of the five competing plays on the following day.

The Howard was overpacked with hardly enough oxygen to go round or any room to stand. I watched the whole performance painfully pressed against the door, fighting for breath, nursing my aching legs, and fending off the spells of dizziness which occasionally attack me if I have to stand in one place for too long. There was a fair amount of jostling too, and once or twice my poor toes were ruthlessly crushed by some anonymous shoe. Nonetheless, I would not have missed it.

Of the five plays, which followed each other in quick succession, with minimal sets and lighting effects, the winner of the Salmawy award was *We Are In A Jug* by Tamer Mahdi, directed by Nermin Amin. It featured a young couple, chained together with a thick rope, in

what looked like a cave or a cell, alternately squabbling, making up games to pass the time, and pining for freedom. The basic situation is not unlike Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* or, indeed, Mohammed Salmawy's *Two Down The Drain* which was a hit at the National a few years ago; but the end is infinitely more optimistic, and takes the form of a punch line that gives the situation a humourous twist and a completely different meaning. When the couple glimpse an opening and crawl out, we suddenly hear a male voice-over congratulating an invisible mother on giving birth to twins. *We Are In A Jug* may have the structure of a joke; but it is a clever joke, cunningly played on the audience, and not without a metaphoric element. The audience loved it and did not mind at all being tricked. All the same, I could not help wondering if the fact that it was the only play in Arabic (the rest were all in English) had in some way influenced its nomination for the award of best play of the festival.

My personal favourite was *Thin Air* by Tom Coash, directed by Francesca Amendolia, and superbly performed by Magda Abdou. Unlike his previous play, *Khamaseen*, which played at the Wallace in Cairo before taking off to the Edinburgh Festival last August, *Thin Air* is a one-woman show, a sensitive, poignant, psychological monologue which takes us through the mind, life and experience of a tightrope-walker. There are flashes of humour, but wintry and subdued. In *Khamaseen*, Coash proved what a magnificent talent he has for comedy and scathing satire, as well as for poetry and pathos. The encounter of a young American bride with the Egyptian culture and language on the one hand, and the American community in Egypt, on the other, sparked off a riveting drama about love, betrayal, female solidarity, and, above all, the need for human understanding, tolerance, respecting the other

and embracing cultural difference. The humour which underpinned many of the scenes and confrontations, and broke out uproariously sometimes, not only balanced the seriousness of the issues raised and the grimness of the heroine's situation, but actually intensified them in a deliciously ironical way. The Khamaseen winds which blow throughout the play provide the atmosphere and form a rich, central metaphor. The same technique is obvious in *Thin Air* where the act of tight rope-walking, its thrills and hazards, becomes a poetic image which sums up and focuses the heroine's life and experience. Funny that Coash should be giving us this little gem of a play during the same season which inspired his earlier one and gave it its title.

The other three plays were — *Me Jane* (by Francesco Amendolia, directed by Tom Coash), with the Jane of the title sitting in a tree in search of security; *Small Talk* (by Laila Rifaat, also directed by Coash), which centres on the lack of communication between parents and children, and different values and cultures; and "99" (by Vaga, directed by Tarek El-Etribi), where the mechanical reeling off of an interminable list of celebrities from all over the world willy-nilly expresses the levelling of all values and the confusion of the postmodernist age. All were taut, witty and great fun. The actors too, and the production crew did a great job; and thanks to their brisk efficiency, the performance of all five plays was accomplished in just one hour and a half. If it had gone on longer, we would have all suffocated.

In less than 10 days I was back at the AUC, this time to the Wallace theatre, to enjoy, in a double bill, Inji El-Solh's productions of Salmway's *Next in Line* and *Come Back Tomorrow*. The plays

(available in English) were done in their original Arabic, with a few minor additions and changes here and there; and though I had seen them professionally done before, I felt as if I was discovering them for the first time. *Next In Line* consists mainly of the verbal and physical interactions (cordial and hostile) of a group of people, from different classes and walks of life, waiting in an endless queue that never moves. We never know what they are waiting for, and neither do they; they have been there for so long they have forgotten; but they keep waiting for their 'turn' which, of course, never comes. As their impatience rises, they grow more quarrelsome and eventually pick out a leader to keep the line in order. Soon enough, the leader who regally occupies the only available chair becomes a tyrant.

This absurd queue, with its senseless fights and feuds and sudden deaths and disappearances, has been interpreted by some critics as an ironical metaphor for the absurdity of the human condition in which the only 'turn' that never fails to come is one's turn to die. Others have seen it as a disguised political satire on modern Egyptian history and, more generally, on the kinds of attitudes that lead to the rise of dictators. But whatever the interpretation, the play derives its dramatic vitality and theatrical vigour from the broad but accurate delineation of its characters, its combination of wit, satire and farce, and the galloping tempo of the dialogue which contrasts sharply with the maddening immobility of the queue.

The second play, *Come Back Tomorrow*, is more sombre. A young man goes to a government office to get his travelling documents officially stamped. There, he is subjected to a series of absurd interrogations, mental assaults and crazy sexual demands, including an

order to marry the male deputy head (who promptly dons a wedding dress in anticipation of the joyous event). Gradually, the thin crust of rational reality cracks and splinters, and what begins as a realistic comedy and a social satire reveals itself as a black, nightmarish farce, culminating in rape and murder. In the final scene, rather than stamp the young man's papers, the office head and his deputy rip off his clothes and (in a euphemistic sequence denoting rape) brutally crush his body under a gigantic official stamp.

El-Solh directed with flair and precision, allowing her young and ebullient actors enough scope to be creative and foreground their skills and talents, while carefully playing them off against each other to enhance the comedy. As a dancer, choreographer and movement expert, she was able to create movement patterns and formations which subtly underlined the sense of absurdity that informs both plays. Nada Shalabi's sets helped her in this respect; they were quasi-realistic but extremely simple, leaving the space free for the actors while hinting at the fragile nature of what we call reality. But, in the final analysis, the real source of pleasure that evening were the young actors — their joy, enthusiasm, and infectious high spirits.

Two Plays by Timberlake Wertenbaker

The Love of the Nightingale at the Women and Memory Forum and *Our Country's Good* at the AUC*

Some dramatists ought to be taken in moderate, well-spaced-out draughts; otherwise they can give you a terrible emotional hangover. Timberlake Wertenbacker (the famous American playwright living in Britain) is of this class of writers; and yet, last week, I was persuaded to take two strong doses of her work within two days of each other.

The first dose was administered at the Women and Memory Research Centre, founded and run (with a bunch of friends) by the self-effacing but extremely energetic Hoda El-Sadda. She had rung up earlier in the week to invite me to an open demonstration and discussion of a new project for a theatre production centering on violence against women. The project is the brainchild of Dalia Basiouny, a young feminist director, and the play she has picked out and done into Egyptian Arabic (to bring its horrors nearer home, as she proudly declares) is Wertenbaker's *The Love of the Nightingale* — a harrowing drama of incest, rape, and physical mutilation. It is based on an old Greek legend about Tereus, son of King Ares of Daulis, who weds Procne, daughter of Pandion, king of Athens, rapes her sister, Philomele, and cuts out her tongue, and is duly punished by Procne: she slays their son, Itys, and serves up his flesh to him at the dinner table. The gods, seeing the sisters fleeing with Tereus in hot pursuit,

* 28.5.1998. In Arabic and English.

axe in hand, decide that things have gone too far and promptly put an end to this gruesome farce: they transform the trio into birds — a nightingale, a swallow, and a hoopoe (or a hawk in some versions of the legend). In Wertenbaker's play, it is Philomele who kills Itys, while his mother holds him, and the cannibalism is omitted.

Basiouny had taken her project to the centre hoping for moral and financial support. Of the former, she got plenty; but the centre, which suffers from a chronic shortage of funds and is already sponsoring research for a feminist production by Caroline Khalil, another young director, could not take on the project. El-Sadda and her partners, however, did not leave Basiouny in the lurch and decided to organise an evening for her at the centre and invite to it feminists, critics, and prospective sponsors to discuss ways of funding and launching the project. It was up to Basiouny to convince her audience of the potential value of her planned production and of her competence as director.

She did both admirably, giving a thorough and detailed description of the proposed work, with costume and set sketches, production tables, rehearsal schedules and background research. She also treated us to a succinct analysis of the play's structure, pointing out its technical merits, powerful dramatic images, and ironical manipulation of different levels of language and modes of speech to expose the power hierarchies and the gender biases underlying human interaction. But what impressed me most was Basiouny's perceptive awareness of the play's innate theatricality. She dwelt with relish on Scene 5 which takes place in an Athenian theatre and weaves in scenes from Euripides' *Hippolytus* which form a crucial dramatic thread and a shattering, ironical prophecy; she equally appreciated the stunning use of gigantic

puppets (not unlike the ones Peter Schumann used for his Bread and Puppet Theatre in the sixties) in the Bacchae carnival scene in which Philomele stages, with their help, in front of her sister, among the revellers and acrobats, a mute, brutal reenactment of her rape and mutilation.

It was obvious that Basiouny, though a keen feminist, had treated the play as a work of art, not as a feminist tract. If we coughed up the money for the production, she concluded, or persuaded others to do so, she would give us, she promised, an enjoyable and entertaining piece of theatre. I believed her. The two scenes that were read from the Arabic version of the play proved Basiouny to be a competent and sensitive translator. The audience were moved by Philomele's suffering, shocked to laughter by the coarseness of Niobe's ribald comments on the rape of her mistress, and enraged by the brutality of Tereus. That evening, Basiouny gave us a tantalising taste of what she and her troupe, Sabeel, have been cooking and are ready to serve provided someone foots the bill. I hope that someone turns up soon before the *Nightingale* project gets stale and we lose a production which not only addresses an issue of great urgency for women, but promises also to address it beautifully.

My second dose of Wertenbaker was more eleborately prepared, dressed and served by Tori Haring-Smith and the Theatre Group of the AUC, and I consumed it with great relish at the Wallace. Like *The Love of the Nightingale*, *Our Country's Good* (which won both *The Evening Standard* Most Promising Playwright Award, and the Laurence Olivier Play of the Year Award in 1988) features violence, but this time not just against women, but against all the deprived, down-

trodden poor, male and female. Rather than a mythical time and place, it is firmly set in a definite historical context and based largely on fact. The story behind the staging of the very first play ever to be put on in Australia was recounted in Thomas Kinneally's novel *The Playmaker* and this provided Wertenbaker with much of her material. The setting is the first convict colony in what later became Sydney, and the events span nearly two years – from the arrival of the First Fleet with its load of prisoners at Botany Bay on 20 January 1788, to the performance of George Farquhar's *The Recruiting Officer* by the convicts on 4 June, 1789.

The planned production engages the centre of Wertenbaker's play and becomes the bone of contention between two factions, the matrix of the dramatic conflict and its driving force. It is a play about theatre, not just its artistic side but also the material and political conditions of making it, the stories and memories of the actors, their hang-ups and daily struggle to go on. As the convicts move back and forth between the stage reality of Farquhar's fictional world and the actual reality of their life in the colony, the play changes mood, language and rhythm, swinging from hilarious comedy and even farce to violent tragedy and bleak despair. But it ends on a triumphant note: theatre survives, even though the actors are poor players and wretched convicts doomed to roam the earth or die. Michael Billington described *Our Country's Good* in *The Guardian* as "a moving and affirmative tribute to the transforming power of drama." It is also an affirmation of the healing power of theatre and its effectiveness as a mode of political resistance.

Director Tori Haring-Smith and her crew (Timaree McCormick, set; Hilary Oak, costumes; Sami Shawky, light; Akram Al-Sharif and Mona

Bur, sound; and Hazem Shebl, photography and technical director) composed a beautiful, uncluttered and highly evocative audio-visual context for the actors' performance. This would not have been possible if Haring-Smith had not decided, as soon as she took over as artistic director of the AUC Theatre Group, to dismantle the interior structure of the Wallace. She did away with the traditional picture-frame stage and the fixed seating and created a versatile space that challenges the imagination of directors and scenic designers and can accommodate almost any type of performance (grand musicals excepted).

For this production, the audience were seated in tiers on three sides of the performance space. The fourth side was a wall, covered with what looked like old, ragged sails or curtains. The floor was covered with wooden boards, with thin slits between them to allow for special lighting effects and for clouds of smoke to seep through at one point. There were also two trap-doors and some rigged up ropes suggesting the rigging of a vessel or, indeed, of a stage. The image of a bare stage was superimposed on the image of a ship-deck with a hold underneath, and this duality, together with the incongruity of setting realistic scenes supposed to take place on land on board an imaginary ship or stage, transformed the whole set, with the help of the music and sound-effects, into a rich, multiple metaphor. At one level it told the audience that the convicts' lot on land was no better than at sea, and constantly reminded us of their dream of sailing back and of their longing for home. But at other levels, it spoke of the lonely and hazardous voyage of life and echoed Shakespeare's "all the world is a stage". This metaphor burst upon us with full force at the very end when, in a magnificent coup de theatre, the sail/curtain covering the fourth wall

'became' the theatre curtain which rose as the actors faced it, to reveal a large mirror, reflecting the audience as well.

The young actors, a large cast of 17, bravely accepted the challenge of this extremely demanding play, and some had the added burden of playing more than one part. They acquitted themselves well on the whole and what they lacked in terms of skill and experience they made up for with their dedication and enthusiasm. Some performances stood out, like Karim Hussein's Arscott, Mohamed Dessouky's Sideway, Teymour Hosny's Harry Brewer, Samar Al-Saleh's Mary, Salma Al-Sayed's Liz, Nadine Khadr's Meg, and Suzette Swanson's Dabby. But they wouldn't have acted the way that did without the active support of the others.

Going out of the Wallace I remembered Dalia Basiouny and all our young, struggling directors and hoped they would not have to go to the ends of the earth and put up with flogging and hanging before they could put on their plays.

Laughter Out of Open Wounds

Lisa Loomer's *The Waiting Room* at the AUC*

In an interview by Stephanie Coen (*American Theatre*, December 1994), American playwright Lisa Loomer admitted that her *Waiting Room* offended some people and made them angry; one woman loudly protested "cancer is not funny". In response to such reactions Loomer says: "I certainly don't mean to say that cancer is funny; I think that people are funny, and situations can be so awfully absurd as to make you laugh. Humour can be a form of survival." Very convincing, until you actually see the play in performance.

Personally, for several days after watching the current production at the Wallace and reading the text (generously made available to me by its director Tori Haring-Smith) I kept wondering if people in the grip of pain and death, and who are consistently and viciously exploited and multilated can be at all funny. However absurd, misguided, or deluded they may be, and even if they are partly responsible for their suffering, which is only partly the case in this play, the laughter they are caused to raise is bound to smell of mortality and leave an acrid taste in the mouth. Can humour when sick and savage be a form of survival?

Loomer is certainly a gifted dramatist, with a lively sense of humour and a sharp eye for the absurdities of life; she is also highly conscious of her moral responsibility as a writer. "I definitely write from a need to try, in my own two hours, to right a wrong," she told her interviewer. In *The Waiting Room*, she tackles serious and urgently

* 12.11.1998. In English.

relevant issues: the oppression and manipulation of women in most, if not all cultures down history and up until now; the beauty myths and their related industries; the medical profession, and health services and forms of healing available to people since Hippocrates's time; the greed and profit-ethics that underpin the competitive market of clinics, hospitals, and pharmaceutical companies; the relations between different cultures, races, classes, and the developed and developing countries; and, to top the list, how to cope with pain, the horrors of chemotherapy, hysterectomy, breast-cancer, losing parts of one's body, and, ultimately, how to face death.

These are issues that concern all of us, and haunt some in their dreams; as Haring-Smith rightly remarks in her director's note in the programme, they "transcend national identity and historical period." But can they transcend the chasm between the healthy and the sick and dying. Will someone with terminal cancer find the play amusing and 'full of laughter'?

The billing of *The Waiting Room* as 'a comedy' raises worrying questions about the nature of entertainment, laughter, and the stuff comedies are made of. In this respect, and though thoroughly anti-Aristotelian (as most feminists are), I have to acknowledge the perspicacity of Aristotle's remark, in *The Poetics*, that any 'fault' or 'deformity' satirised in comedy should be "of such a sort as is neither painful nor destructive" (Thomas Twining's translation).

But it is not just the tag, comedy, that disturbs me about this play; and 'black comedy' would not have solved the problem either. I think what is wrong with it is that it attempts too much, crams in too many themes, moods and scenes, and seems to be moving in several opposite

directions all at once, which occasionally fuzzes the focus, blurs or dilutes the issues and confuses the emotional response of the viewer (or reader). The structure conceived by Loomer is quite ambitious and complex: clusters of characters are grouped under one theme as counterpoints and variations; and the themes are meant to intersect and get tangled — gaining in depth and significance as they do. But in the process of executing it, she seems to have been torn between the desire to produce a serious satire which is also exciting, entertaining and funny (a very worthy aim since feminist writing has long been accused of being oppressively earnest, dull and humourless), and her moral, didactic urge to ruthlessly expose, and, hopefully, right as many wrongs as she can.

This conflict of directions shows through at many points in the play and is quite distressing sometimes. It is acutely so in the first scene which brings together a heavily corseted English woman from the nineteenth century schedualed for a hysterectomy, a Chinese woman from the eighteenth century whose toes are falling off as a result of foot-binding, and a New York secretary from our time with suspected breast cancer. (The device of intermingling cultural frames and different epochs was tried earlier by British dramatist Caryl Churchill in the first act of her *Top Girls*, but Loomer carefully sustains it throughout her play). The ailments of the women, needless to say, are painful, ultimately destructive, and far from funny: one will lose her uterus, the second her foot, perhaps both feet, and the third her breasts and life. And yet, while condemning the cultural practices and beauty myths (gullibly swallowed by all three) which cause so much maiming and suffering, Loomer bends over backwards to squeeze laughter out of the women's placid acceptance of their suffering, blind acquiescence to the

norms of beauty in their respective cultures, and their culturally determined responses and reactions to each other. At one point, we are supposed to laugh at Victoria's shocked and horrified reaction to the Chinese woman's unemotional account of what happened to her feet after they were bound: "(They) Got smaller! Soon the flesh became putrescent, and little pieces sloughed off from the sole as toes began to putrefy." I'll spare you the rest of the gruesome details.

Of course there is a kind of laughter which is generated by horror as a release for tension; but does not the release of tension dissipate any sense of rage and anger? And does not this run contrary to the moral and didactic thrust of the play? It is true that as the play progresses, Loomer shows more sympathy towards her women and the tone grows gentler and more tender. But this does not happen until the last scene of Act One when the accent begins to perceptibly shift from the oppression of women down the centuries (which can and should be remedied) to the incurable greed inherent in human nature. The shift has the effect of making suffering an ineluctable part of the human condition which can only be softened and alleviated through sympathy and human solidarity.

To say that Loomer's *Waiting Room*, in reading or performance, gave me pleausre would be a patent lie; it gave me some lurid nightmares, and feelings of frustrated rage and hopelessness. If "Mother Nature", as the Jamaican nurse, Brenda, says, "has a cure for most everything. (Pause) 'Cept human nature," then what hope is there of ever achieving justice or eradicating greed and the lust for power. And yet, I would not have missed the experience of this play both in print or at the Wallace. In choosing it, Tori Haring-Smith put her cast

and crew through a gruelling test (think of all the accents involved, the constant, and, sometimes, abrupt change of mood or shift of tone required, the fast 20 scene changes executed by 4 actors, dressed as orderlies, on skates, at lightening speed); and they acquitted themselves quite well, showing confidence, precision, a good sense of timing and skill. The wheeling in and out of the set pieces by the skaters was dizzing and a bit distracting sometimes but it achieved the effect Haring-Smith was after: the feel of the whirlwind of contemporary life. Hazem Shebl's spare set – an empty space that can be shaped and reshaped – with nothing fixed but 3 swinging doors at the back, helped greatly in this respect. But apart from the effort and the amount of work invested in this production (which, mind you, and putting aside my personal, mixed response to it, many of the audience found devastatingly funny and deeply moving), one should note with gratitude Haring-Smith's diligent attempts to expose the Egyptian audience to new, exciting, and provocative work and keep them abreast of what is happening in the theatre scene of the American Fringe.

Living With Her Own Truth

Maria Irene Fornes in Egypt*

In the lyric that ends *Promenade*, one of Maria Irene Fornes's earliest plays (it was first performed by the Judson Poets Theatre in New York in 1965, with music by Al-Carmines), the Mother says: "You live with your own truth,/ I cannot live with it./ I have to live with my own truth,/ Whether you like it or not." Having met Fornes on four different occasions last week, I feel sure that this simple belief has been the shaping and propelling force in her life and career. But truth in Fornes's case is far from simple. It cannot be grasped cerebrally and fixed in clear, rational statements. At once complex, paradoxical and elusive, it has to be intuitively and viscerally rediscovered with every new dawn. To say that it is a constant process of orientation towards the self and the world, a ceaseless and fervent struggle to make sense of life, acquire a degree of wisdom, and preserve one's integrity, capacity for compassion, and faith in human nature, is the nearest one can get to a verbal description of what Fornes means by her own truth.

"I know what madness is," says another lyric in *Promenade*: "Madness is lack of compassion" — not knowing "how another person feels" of putting oneself "in their shoes". Twenty years later, in *The Conduct of Life* (1985), we find this definition of madness embodied in Orlando, an army lieutenant in some unspecified Latin American country, who, in his thirst for "Money, power, adultation" — the only things "that make a madman feel sure," according to the *Promenade*

* 26.11.1998.

lyric — takes on the job of a torturer to gain promotion and savagely abuses his wife and female servants. But even towards Orlando, Fornes shows understanding and compassion. His madness is the product and part of a more general and pervasive madness, of a "bad germ" that has infected people's hearts and minds and caused them to rot. The impact of having Nena, the destitute girl of twelve who has been kidnapped, raped, tortured and imprisoned by him, voice this compassion is shattering. Four scenes before his wife shoots him at the end of the play, Nena says: "I want to conduct each day of my life in the best possible way. I should value the things I have. And I should value all those who are near me. And I should value the kindness that others bestow upon me. And if someone should treat me unkindly, I should not blind myself with rage, but I should see them and receive them, since maybe they are in worse pain than me."

Such disarmingly simple, open and honest statements of faith often contrast with chilling accounts and scenes of brutality and violent ends; but the effect is never sentimental or sensational. The unconventional structure of the plays, which often disregards plot, character development, external logic and spatial conventions, and draws on several non-literary sources and artistic genres (certain styles of painting, the movies, opera, and modern dance), allows Fornes to be at once deeply emotional and intriguingly theatrical.

I don not know what kind of childhood Fornes has in Havana (where she was born) before she immigrated to the United States in 1945 at the age of 15. But I suspect it was not a very happy one. It was something she said at a small luncheon party at the home of the American cultural attache. We were talking about names and how they

are pronounced in different languages and she said that when she first came to the States she worked for a short time in a factory (she attended public schools in Havana but never went to university). The first day they told her that since they already had a Mary in the factory, they were going to call her Irene. It did not matter to her because both names sounded strange in English. But being called Irene gave her a curious sense of liberation. "It was like being given a new identity and it was thrilling. I could put the past behind me and I was glad to let it go," she said. I tingled with curiosity; but the way she said these words and the tone of her voice told me that I too should let it go. Despite her warmth, geniality and spontaneous, affectionate nature, Fornes has a kind of toughness that stops people overstepping certain lines. The same toughness characterises her dramatic career which, in the words of Susan Sontag (in her preface to the second volume of Fornes's plays, 1985), she conducted "with exemplary tenacity and scrupulousness." Coming to the theatre at the age of 30, she joined the avant garde artists and dramatists who created the off-off-Broadway world in the 1960s. But unlike most of her contemporaries, and despite 6 Obie Awards (an Obie Award-winning record that is only equalled by that of Samuel Beckett and Sam Shepard), she has remained working there, shunning the temptation of fame and fortune.

At the workshop on playwriting she conducted at El-Tali'a theatre (one of three — the other two took place at the AUC and Al-Hanager Centre), she clearly told the group at the beginning that vanity, the desire to seem witty, smart, and clever, and the pursuit of fame are the deadliest enemies of the playwright. "We, all artists, have vanity because we want to produce good work and take pride in it," she added: "but we do not create to impress the others. We create out of a need to

express, protest, or explore, and to do this, the whole of the self, and not just the ego or the conscious mind has to be involved in the process." The act of creation, she went on to say, is not an act of self-assertion; it is an act of surrender, of 'deliverance' which requires 'modesty' and 'humility'.

At the Theatre Institute of the Academy of Arts, where she spent 2 hours with the staff and students, she described having the chance to do the work one wants to do without pressure or interference, or having to worry about 'success' and the budget, as 'a real gift'. If a few people whom one respects admire one's work, it is another 'gift'. Fornes would not have survived on Broadway; wisely, she stayed off it, working in small theatres, with artists and actors of kindred minds, usually directing her own plays. She is a very visual director and works closely with her lighting and set designers. "When I am writing, I see my characters in real places. When I am directing, I treat the stage as a canvas and I use lighting, movement, and set to paint it," she told her audience at the Theatre Institute. It does not matter if it does not look realistic; in fact, she hardly ever gives a thought to realism when she structures her productions. "I like different levels and planes on the stage, doors and windows that create the illusion of other spaces, and I like to play with light and shadow," she said, adding, "if Picasso and Dali can paint the way they do, why can't I?"

Fornes came to the theatre from the world of painting; she spent three years in Paris training as a painter, followed by three years in New York as a textile designer. That is why she is so blissfully free of dramatic and theatrical conventions, or what she calls "the heavy burden of Aristotle and his dramatic conflict." The decision to devote her life to theatre was made after she watched Roger Blin's 1954 Paris production

of Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*. Of this experience she said: "I didn't know a word of French. I had not read the play in English. But what was happening in front of me had a profound impact without even understanding a word. Imagine a writer whose theatricality is so amazing and so important that you could see a play of his, not understand one word, and be shook up. I remained in my seat for 10 minutes after the play ended. I could not move. I was alone in the theatre; all the audience had gone. When I finally left that theatre, I felt that my life was changed, that I was seeing everything with a different clarity. I looked at the city, and it was not what it was before."

It took her six years, however, to produce her first play, *The Widow*, which was published in Cuba as *La Viuda* in 1961. *Tango Palace*, her first important play followed in 1964 and it clearly owes its genesis to Beckett's two tramps in *Godot*. It shows two men, ill-fated lovers, who create their own world — a highly theatrical space — and enact the roles of seudcer-seduced, father-son, teacher-pupil, masculine- feminine, each engaged in a metaphysical power struggle. With *The Successful Life of 3: A Skit for Vaudeville* (in which He, She, and 3 are involved in a love triangle), the awards started coming. It won Fornes her first Obie Award in 1965, and the same year her *Promenade* won her another. Of the latter Phyllis Mael says, it "mixes wit and compassion, humour and tenderness, zaniness and social satire as prisoners named 105 and 106 journey from prison out into the world and back again." Stephen Holden adds in the *New York Times* that it "is really more a choreographed oratorio than a conventional musical," and that "the music and language are reduced to artful basics, as in the Virgil-Thomson-Gertrude Stein operas."

Dedicated and prolific, Fornes went on to produce more than two dozen plays, spread over three decades, and they are all of the finest quality. Unfortunately, none of them has been done into Arabic and the texts are not available here even in English. Even to specialists, drama and theatre students, writers, directors, critics, and students of American literature, she had been, until this visit, a complete unknown. This makes the initiative of the U.S. embassy and cultural centre who arranged Fornes's first visit to Egypt and planned her successful programme of workshops, talks and meetings all the more valuable. I, personally, and all the young artists that have participated in this programme, feel privileged that we got the chance to discover this wonderful artist, get introduced to her dramatic world, and meet her in person. Her unassuming simplicity and power of inspiration in the workshops have enthralled the hearts of many and she will continue to be remembered, and cherished, long after she has left us. She is truly, in the words of Bonnie Marranca "an exemplary artist who through her writing and teaching has created a life in the theatre away from the crass hype that attends lesser belings."

All the World is a Page

A.R. Gurney's *Love Letters* at the AUC[*]

Play-reading, for entertainment or educational purposes, is a familiar practice in high schools and universities; in some small theatres, it is used to test new scripts on an audience to gauge their potential for success before going through with a full production. It is peculiar, however, to find a writer of contemporary realistic drama deliberately opting for this minimalistic mode of theatrical representation. In his *Love Letters* (directed by Tori Haring-Smith and presented at the Wallace with four different casts, involving AUC teaching staff and Egyptian professional actors, each playing two nights), American playwright A.R. Gurney created a curious play which requires as a condition for its existence the absence of movement and scene-changes. Like an epistolary novel — a form that flourished in Britain, France, and Germany between 1740s and about 1800 — it consists solely of the letters, notes, and postcards exchanged between two characters from childhood to middle life.

Letters, of course, have frequently featured in drama as clues or devices, often playing crucial roles in the development of the action or providing turning points. Macbeth's letter to Lady Macbeth which sparks off the thought of murdering Duncan is a notable example; and in many plays the hiding, discovering, or going astray of a letter can damn or save a character. But a drama where the characters never come face to face — except off-stage, in meetings we hear about but never get

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* 4.3.1999. In English.

to see, where the dramatic context of the communicative act (usually called the *context-of-utterance* which, as Keir Elam says, comprises "the relationship set up between speaker, listener and discourse *in the immediate here-and-now*,") is non-existent, is quite an oddity and seems like a contradition in terms. In this sense, one can legitimately wonder if Gurney's *Love Letters* is not really a short epistolary novel masquarding as a play.

The kinship of the epistolary novel with drama is obviously very strong: in both, the story reaches us as it develops through the characters involved in it without the mediation of a narrator, and this immediacy lends itself to intense expression of feeling and subjective analysis. Moreover, the epistolary form implies a communicative situation involving an addresser and an addressee and, therefore, creates the illusion of an ongoing dialogue in the present. But it remains an illusion and rarely becomes dramatic. In Samuel Richardson's *Pamela* or *Clarissa Harlowe* what matters is the narrative communicated through the letters and not the act and mode of communication itself. The fact that the story unfolds through letters — a speaker addressing a listener in writing — does not affect its shape, course, or meaning. Indeed, one can easily imagine recasting both novels in a different form without substantial loss to the story except, perhaps, in terms of immediacy, urgency and intimacy.

In Gurney's *Love Letters*, the situation is radically different. Here, the letters do not simply tell us a story that can exist independently of them, but are themselves, as a form of communication through writing, part of the subject matter of the story and one of the major forces that shape the two characters' lives and the course of their relationship. In

this sense, Gurney's letters are performative, rather than narrative, and constitute a real dramatic dialogue where words become action.

Within a few minutes of the beginning, the play draws attention to its epistolary form, making it a subject for discussion and a bone of contention between the two characters who are, in turn, defined by their attitude to it. Melissa, who hates writing letters and prefers drawing as a means of communication and self-expression, is gradually revealed as a person who relates to the world physically, spontaneously and concretely. She resents and resists what Gramsci has called "the prison-house of language" which isolates people from each other and the world. In one of her rare long letters (she mostly writes brief notes), she explains to Andy why they failed to make love when they met. Neither she nor he recognized the person they knew from the letters: "two people were absent from that hotel room," she tells him.

For Andy, however, writing is an existential need. Unlike Melissa, he relates to the world conceptually and can only experience life through the mediation of language. Writing is his way of piecing together, defining and projecting himself (or rather, multiple selves), of finding order in the flux of experience, and making sense of the randomness of life. As the play progresses, however, the letters seem to draw the two lovers apart rather than bring them together, and their predominantly light and jocular tone, which is kept up till near the end, intensifies the growing sense of sorrow.

Andy's and Melissa's attitudes to language represent two ways of responding to the world, and two systems of values. Gurney does not take sides; he plays them off against each other, projecting each with profound sympathy and understanding as part of humanity's struggle to

make the best of life and attain happiness, while raising in the process questions about the randomness of life and the role of language, as a social institution, in the construction of subjectivity and the production of meaning. The constant clashing and efforts at reconciliation between the attitudes, responses and values of Melissa and Andy constitute the dramatic conflict in the play; and the dramatic action it generates consists not in the sketchy narratives of their lives provided through the letters, but in their movement towards and away from each other — a movement which partly produces and controls the narratives. It is this, together with the lively style of the letters, their conversational mode, the absence of consequential narration, the telegraphic way of providing information, the telling gaps of silence which interrupt the flow of correspondence and form an integral part of its overall rhythm, which may persuade us that *Love Letters* is a drama despite its curious form.

Speculative questions about genre, however, become irrelevant in the presence of performance. After all, Dickens's public readings of his novels were theatrical performances, even though he did not pretend to be anything else but Dickens when impersonating his characters. There is something essentially theatrical, even dramatic, about someone stepping up in front of an audience and telling a story. Performance cuts across the genres of fiction, poetry and drama, and so, even if one remains doubtful about the provenance of *Love Letters*, one can still enjoy it as theatre — and I most certainly did at the Wallace. I watched it with two casts, one all-Egyptian (Khaled El-Sawy and Mona Zaki), and one American-Egyptian (Tori Haring-Smith and Ezzat Abou Oaf). Both were enjoyable, and it was exciting to watch on two consecutive nights different actors doing the same part, compare their interpretations and the subtle shades of meaning each brought to the character. In the

Haring-Smith/Abou Oaf performance, the cultural difference, marked by the accents, created an unexpected, delicious irony. Abou Oaf's palpably Egyptian accent made his Andy, who in the play is supposed to represent the typical upright American citizen who embodies the American ethos and feels quite at home in his culture, come across as a foreigner trying desperately to pass himself off as an American. The accent seemed like an ironical comment on his way of life, his repeatedly voiced sense of duty 'to family, country and self, in that order', and the system of values he champions. Compared to his Andy, Haring-Smith's Melissa became less of an alienated soul, with stronger roots in the culture, and more authenticity and strength of character. It was a fortuitous contribution which stressed the superficiality of the apparent order, integrity and coherence of Andy's life and sense of identity. Unfortunately I missed the performances of the other Egyptian–American cast (Mahmoud El-Lozy and Krista Scott) and the all-American cast (Eric Grischkat and Krista Scott). What other insights, subtle shadings and variations one might have come across there, I regret to think.

Benbeath the Monica Bandwagon

Two Commercial Theatre Takes on the Clinton/Lewinsky Affair*

Cheated, tricked, swindled, bamboozled and a dozen other such synonyms will not suffice to adequately describe the kind of feeling which will sneak up, viciously nag and then completely overwhelm you as you watch *Me, My Wife and Monica* at Qasr El-Nil Theatre, and which will continue to haunt and nettle you for days afterwards, souring your temper. The title, which explicitly points in the direction of the Clinton/Lewinsky scandal, tantalisingly promising, at worst, a vulgar rehash of the affair (if such a thing is at all possible considering the coarseness which marked its reporting in the media), and at best, an ironical perspective on it, is nothing but a blatant conman's trick. We are told that even among criminals and gangsters there is a code of honour; and in the Egyptian commercial theatre, even at the bottom rungs, such a code had always existed, even if it didn't boil down to anything more than the dictum: Don't deceive the audience. It implicitly meant that it didn't matter how many artistic atrocities were committed on stage or how much you violated the critics' sensibilities so long as the audience knew beforehand what they were letting themselves in, and paying, for. But in *Me, My Wife and Monica*, with the hapless Monica trailing behind in the title as an afterthought, this simple code was flagrantly ignored, making this miserable show a prime example of theatrical roguery, of taking money under false pretences.

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* 28.10.1999. In Arabic.

Those who went looking for the Lewinsky story, or even the faintest representation or wildest distortion of it, paying exorbitant prices for the good seats (L.E. 200, 150, and 100), did not find even a fleeting shadow of it. The Monica of the title is indeed an afterthought and a forgery. For two hours we were treated to a string of verbal exchanges at a vet's clinic consisting of scabrous jokes about the physical attributes of women and scurrilous references to the biological functions of both humans and animals, particularly dogs. More tedious than shocking, this avalanche of fetid humour did not seem to be leading anywhere or building up to anything.

To hoodwink the audience, and persuade them to stick to their seats and swallow such horrendous drivel (which many refused to do, leaving halfway through the performance), author Ahmed El-Ebiari sporadically dangled the name Monica as a carrot in the form of telephone calls from some American female with whom the vet once had an affair after meeting her in Disney Land! It eventually transpires, after three hours, in the latter half of the second part (and by that time no one really cares), that the mysterious Monica is an American agent after the vet's reported discovery of a formula to make dogs sniff out nuclear waste. To add insult to injury, a female dwarf is introduced as her nymphomaniac mother who becomes infatuated with an abnormally overdeveloped, feeble-minded boy of nine from Upper Egypt (acted by a gigantic man in a galabiya) which occasions another spate of nauseating jokes about the sex-life of freaks.

The array of puerile imbecilities also includes Monica's assistant, whose impaired speech triggers half an hour of mucky punning; the vet's insipid bride, who insists on sleeping with her dog (a bitch) in her

arms, making the consummation of the marriage impossible; her addlebrained, senile father — a retired soccer referee who bribes the vet to produce for him 11 grandchildren to form his private football team; a slow-witted burglar who has to be constantly spanked to remember what he has to do, and therefore always walks with his buttocks sticking out; the vet's inveterately bigamous and foul-mouthed attendant and his new young wife, who serves as the convenient butt of his smutty humour, not to mention the delirious musical patchwork of American and Egyptian pop songs, with 'Strangers in the night' and 'Old Macdonald had a farm' squeezed in.

Such inanities are not uncommon in the Egyptian commercial theatre, particularly when the scripts are concocted by unconscionable ham-writers of Ahmed El-Ebiari's ilk. One would not have minded them — indeed, one would not have so much as gone near the theatre, let alone into it — had they only been honest and left Ms Lewinsky's name out of it.

"There is a kind of deadly comedy that reduces everything it touches to dust and ashes, leaving the audience with nothing but the taste of death," Youssef El-'Ani, the Iraqi playwright, actor and director once told me. *Me, My Wife and Monica*, even with Samir Ghanem in the lead, with ravishing Nermine El-Fiqi assisting, is one such comedy.

Having been taken for a ride, and a very nasty and expensive one, by El-Ebiari and his gang, I was reluctant to venture upon Sayed Radi's *Kimo and the Blue Dress*. But I am glad I did: by comparison it seems a gem. The central moral issues of the Clinton/Lewinsky affair — adultery and lying under oath to save one's reputation and public image, especially when one's whole future, career and family-life are at stake

— are squarely addressed and boldly examined with as much seriousness as comedy would allow. To bring the issues nearer home, playwright Faysal Nada projected them in the context of Egyptian society today through a story very similar to a case recently reported in the papers in which a lecturer in the Department of Psychology at Cairo University was accused by a female student of attempting to rape her and was arrested and is still in custody.

In the play, the Egyptian Clinton (Yehya El-Fakharani) is also a member of academia and teaches psychology. But, unlike the hapless lecturer, he is a full professor, a distinguished public figure, and has a thriving private practice which, ironically, brings about his downfall.

Attracted by his skill, charming bedside manner, charismatic personality, and many TV appearances, women flock to his clinic, and many — rich, leisured and beautiful — flirt with him (which, at 50, he finds reassuring and secretly enjoys) or try to seduce him, sometimes quite aggressively. And though happily married, and in love with his wife (Sawsan Badr), a famous TV broadcaster, he is passing through a mid-life crisis and beginning to fret and slightly chafe at the conjugal bit after 20 years. As a last fling, in a moment of weakness, he allows himself to be seduced by his rapacious, voluptuous assistant Monica (Nahla Salama) who is half-American on her mother's side.

At this stage, and just as the doctor's ordeal is about to begin, the play, still superimposing its two source stories on each other, begins to slip. The Egyptian Monica accuses her employer of rape when he refuses to marry her and gets him arrested and put on trial, causing a public scandal. Why? The usual melodramatic answer: she comes from a bad family; her father is a drunken dud and her mother a crook

serving a sentence in the States. She is also after publicity and the money it will bring. Several female patients, suffering from various complexes, gang up against the doctor, egged on by Monica's rabid female lawyer (a travesty of the militant feminist) and give false evidence, all accusing him of rape. Suddenly, rape — a very thorny and painful issue — becomes the focus, rather than the doctor's plight and the very credible reasons that led to it.

I felt positively disturbed, almost threatened, as I listened to rape charges being lightly joked about and cynically dismissed as a weapon that women wield against men when it suits their purposes, with the implicit and dangerous message that rape victims are not victims at all but, in fact, seducers. This may be true of the plaintiffs in the play, but frequently the text tends to use the specific dramatic situation in hand as a springboard for forceful, sweeping generalisations about women's manipulation of sex as power and men's weakness, even helplessness before it.

This tendency to glibly trot out the trite clichés of the old-fashioned sex-war, though it still works in commercial comedies and amuses many, has marred *Kimo* in many places and curtailed its potential as a serious, daring comedy. But despite the strong streak of male-chauvinism that runs through it and underpins the characterisation, particularly the female types, and not-withstanding the brief but startling intrusion of politics in the form of slides (of Bill and Hilary Clinton, Lewinsky, Yasser Arafat and Princess Diana, among other celebrities) accompanied by a song condemning the moral hypocrisy of the US Senate and its double standards in foreign policy (a view reiterated by most Egyptians during the Clinton impeachment), *Kimo and the Blue*

Dress is good entertainment and is occasionally actually refreshing. It is well-made, crisp, fast-paced, audacious, relevant, and extremely funny. And if it drags a bit in two scenes, has a little too many stereotypes, and is not above offending feminists, one tends to soon forget it, thanks to the actors who sweep us along. Sawsan Badr and Nahla Salama gave delightful performances, openly adopting a broad burlesque style, and many in the supporting cast brought zest and freshness to the old stock-characters they were landed with. But it is Yehya El-Fakharani who gives *Kimo* weight and coherence and manages to prevent the serious issues it initially raises from becoming completely sub-merged in laughter. He was scintillating, magnificently diversified, richly subtle and thoroughly credible and sympathetic as Bill Clinton.

Delicate Balance

Maria-Irene Fornes' *Abingdon Square* at the AUC*

When Cuban-born American playwright and director Maria-Irene Fornes visited Egypt in the spring of '99, no one here seemed to have ever heard of her, let alone read or seen any of her forty-odd plays. Yet, within two weeks, she managed to capture everybody's imagination, creating firm, affectionate bonds with some, and making a powerful, indelible impression on the minds of many. For the young artists who attended her play-writing workshop at El-Tali'a (Avant-garde) theatre in Ataba, or the theatre students who listened to her talk about he work at the Academy of Arts, she was particularly inspiring and a liberating force. The freshness of her understanding of theatre and approach to it was exhilarating since, as she told her listeners, she followed no dramatic rules, precepts or theories, had had no professional or academic training in theatre (she was trained as a painter), had joined the Thespian tribe only by a lucky accident (after attending Zero Mostel's *Ulysses in Nighttown* and Roger Blin's production of Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* in Paris in 1954), and, therefore, had embarked on her career blissfully ignorant of the Western dramatic heritage and happily unshackled by the awesomeness of its achievements. She treated the stage as a canvass, she said, and always worked closely from the start with her stage and lighting designers. What intrigued her most initially, and eventually triggered off the

* 24.2.2000. In English.

drama, was the placement of the characters on different planes and the sources of light. This explains, perhaps, why doors and windows feature so prominently in many of her plays as structural components.

To the budding playwrights and directors at El-Tali'a workshop, she offered no recipe, no ready-made formulae; instead, she taught them by a series of excercises (some of them seemingly idiotic and extremely funny, others approaching auto-hypnosis) how to let down the barriers of the rational mind, open the floodgates of memory and let the images flow out freely, then watch how they form themselves into clusters. Reading the meaning of these clusters becomes the subject of the drama and the way to explore, with as much honesty and integrity as possible, the moral and existential dimensions of life. Young as they were, the eager artists at El-Tali'a workshop realized that the freedom Fornes preached was a hard, responsible choice which required infinite courage, spiritual discipline, a lot of hard work and also a ready surrender of vanity and a willingness to embrace the loneliness and pain that go with the choice of freedom.

One year after Fornes' visit, and despite its strong impact, very few Egyptian artists have had the chance to get acquainted with her work; none of her plays has been done into Arabic, and prints in English can only be got through foreign agencies. It was therefore with great joy that the young Egyptian artists who worked with Fornes last year received the recent AUC company production of her 1987 *Abingdon Square*. More gratifying still was the quality of the production which tackled with great finesse and sensitivity a complex, problematic and quite hazardous text, one which delights in dangerously teetering on the edge of melodrama and farce at every point, but manages to avoid slipping into either at the very last minute.

Fornes is known for drawing upon American popular forms — movies, vaudeville, burlesque, and musical comedy — for her dramatic structures. In *Abingdon Square*, melodrama is the chosen form, and it dominates the whole play, providing not only the skeletal framework, but also the plot and incidents. Indeed, a summary of the plot would make the play sound like a hackneyed 'fallen woman' kind of melodrama, while a clumsy performance might make it come across as a parody of one. A widower aged 50 marries an orphan girl who is only 15 and ravishingly beautiful to boot. (Great potential for farce). He has a son, the girl's age, and both are deeply attached to each other. (Tantalising intimations of possible incestuous love and a Phaedra theme). She takes a lover, has an illegitimate child whom the husband takes for his own, and secretly rents a place nearby to meet her paramour clandestinely. As happens in many melodramas, the discovery of the affair is brought about by means of a simple (and cruelly overworked) device, a piece of paper — usually a letter; but in this case, it is a rent receipt. What follows is predictable: the husband is duly enraged, chucks the adulterous wife out, takes away her child and hides it in a secret place; when the lover eventually leaves her, she takes to drink, becomes an easy pick-up and progressively deranged, developing both homicidal and suicidal tendencies. The melodramatic crescendo reaches a roaring climax when the wronged, harassed husband tries to shoot her, then to shoot himself, and ends up having a stroke. The end is also typical of the model Fornes defiantly and quite openly adopts: the play ends in reconciliation over the death-bed of the husband whom the erring wife had devotedly tended and cared for like her lost baby. And, indeed, in a different play, the husband's final "Marion ... Marion ... I love you," and her agonized "I love you, too.

... Don't die ...! Don't die ...!" would have made me squirm in my seat with embarrassment or bolt out of the theatre giggling hysterically. In *Abingdon Square*, however, whether in print, or as proncounced by Suzette Swanson (Marion) and Michael Guirguis (Juster) in Frank Bradley's fine production of the play at the Wallace, those tediously familiar, over-used words had a different ring, a kind of urgency, and tragic poignancy, as if they had just been discovered at the cost of great human suffering; and simple as they were, like Wordsworth's "least flower that blows", they brought "thoughts too deep for tears."

Unlike the old alchemists, Fornes seems to have found the legendary philosopher's stone and could therefore transmute a naive and simplistic form like melodrama into a serious, complex and sophisticated dramatic inquiry into the nature of human feelings and relationships and their ethical underpinnings. Like Euripides who, in the words of Jean Paul Sartre, used Greek mythology for the sole purpose of exploding it, Fornes takes up melodrama in orer to subver its simplistic and superficial worldview, its rigid stereotyping of people and their relationships, and its naive black-and-white morality. She does this by planting real characters — sensitive, complex, unfixed and highly conscious — in a highly artificial form. The result is a series of delightful and enlightening explosions of all the expectations raised by the conventional melodramatic plot. Neither Juster nor Marion fit the bill as either the traditional old, jealous husband of farce or the fallen, repentant woman of melodrama. The son, Michael, neither resents nor covets his father's young wife, but maintains an affectionate friendship with her till the end and does not even think that her taking a lover is wrong. The illegitimate Thomas, against all expectations, is not fathered by the lover, Frank, but by a stranger, a window-cleaner or glazier,

who comes into the house one day then disappeares forever. Moreover, despite the final reconciliation, Marion never recovers her child, and Juster dies without telling her the child's whereabouts.

This constant clashing of living characters and conventional situations transforms melodrama as a form into a metaphor for the banality, superficiality, and stultifying moral and social conventionality of ordinary life. To survive as human beings and not 'drown in vagueness', as Marion feels at the beginning, the characters have to break through their given stereotypes and keep on doing it throughout, and this is the really thrilling dramatic conflict in *Abingdon Square*. It is also a big and difficult challenge to any director who takes on the play.

Fornes usually directs her own plays and doesn't like anyone else fiddling with them. In the case of Frank Bradley's production, however, I think she would have approved. The play unfolded like a series of images rescued from the ruthless flow of time (clearly marked on a screen on the right), and though they had a certain touching fadedness — the effect of the lighting and colour palette of the set and costumes — they were clear-cut, carefully detailed, sensitively shaded and very powerful. The style of acting, though strictly naturalistic, had subtle variations ranging from the blithely exuberant and fervently passionate to the tenderly muted and gently reserved. In contrast, Timaree McCormick's set was predominantly abstract, consisting mostly of black geometric blocks placed on different levels, representing different locations. At the back, instead of the two large French doors indicated by Fornes in her stage directions, a big white sheet was draped over what seemed like a rectangular frame. Initially, the whole set is covered with white sheets, which gives the impression

of a deserted house (as if the drama had already been played out and ended, and what we are about to see is a recollection of distant events, some photos in an old album). The dominant whiteness also carries faint and disturbing hints of both death and innocence. As the play progresses, the sheets are gradually removed, revealing more and more of the severe blackness of the set, and marking the progression from innocence to experience. The last sheet to be removed is the upright one at the back, which at one point represented the attic where Marion studied her Dante, frenzidely recited bits of his *Purgatorio* to strengthen her mind and fight off the feeling of drowning in vagueness. It is removed at the moment she discovers her sexuality, in her brief encounter with the glazier, and what it reveals is the living room of her future apartment and place of exile at Abingdon Square. Unlike the part of the set representing the conjugal home, the part of the rented apartment we see features a realistic fireplace with a large mirror on top (and here McCormick and the director followed Fornes's directions). From that moment on, the two contrasting spaces exist simultaneously in full view, translating in visual terms Marion's conflicting desires and loyalties. One white sheet, however, remains in place until the very end, the one which covers old Juster's bed, and it is only removed to serve as his shroud.

of Fornes's cherished doors and windows (her stage directions mention seven) we saw only a shadowy one, at the far end on one side. The rest were imaginary, or drawn by the light on the floor of the set at different angles, with varying degrees of intensity and shades of colour. This spacial fluidity, together with Hani Araman's sensitive lighting design, gave the production a dreamlike quality, the impression of something remembered rather than physically seen. The melodramatic

plot receded to the background and became insignificant, leaving one free to experience with painful intensity the sad passage of time, the changing of the seasons, the transience of happiness, and the relentless fading of light and joy that inevitably accompanies growing up and voyaging through the turbulent seas of experience.

But notwithstanding Bradley's and his artistic crew's imaginative contributions, it is amazing that *Abingdon Square* came across so well with such a young and relatively inexperienced cast. They did their best and gave decent, credible performances. The surprise of the evening, however, was Suzette Swanson. As Marion, she had the biggest task and the heaviest burden. The success or failure of the production hung on her performance and she gave one that will linger long in the memory.

Going Out With a Bang
at the AUC*

A few weeks ago, a friend of mine, noting my deep distress as we watched Israeli bulldozers on television razing Palestinian homes to the ground and dazed women and children sifting through the rubble for anything they could slavage, said by way of comforting both of us: "At least no one was killed. Thank God for that. Houses can be rebuilt." She was right no doubt, but her last sentence bugged me. Can houses really be rebuilt? We can replace them with new buildings, of course, and strive to make them a replica of the old ones; but will they be the same houses? Aren't houses, and all cherished buildings for that matter, just like people? — quite replaceable in terms of function but irrecoverable when it comes to the quality and feel of their presence? Though we rarely admit it, one of the most painful experiences in life is the disappearance of old buildings one has loved — buildings that talked to one like a friend, that could embrace and comfort.

Last week, I visited the Wallace for the last time to say goodbye. I had already been told a couple of months ago that soon, in May to be precise, its brilliant career as a prestigious theatrical venue, launched in 1969 with a production of *Othello*, would come to a close. What would become of it? I asked Frank Bradley, the head of the Department of Performing and Visual Arts at the AUC. Hearing it would be turned over to the library or some other department, I thought of the long procession of motley characters that trod its boards for over 30 years and hoped, in a sudden fit of malice, that their ghosts would haunt the

* 17.5.2001. In English.

place and force the new occupants out. But if the occupants were American, the outcome could be doubtful: in a funny ghost story I once read (I am almost sure it was by Oscar Wilde), an American family move into a haunted house in the English countryside and prove more than a match for the poor ghost who finally flees in despair. In the programme of *Grease*, the Wallace farewell production, a fittingly nostalgic show, Bradley says: "The sadness with which we leave The Wallace is tempered by the thrill we feel as we see constructed before our eyes one of the finest theatres in the Middle East," namely, "The Falaki Theatres (main stage and studio) in the new Falaki Academic Centre." I confess to a similar thrill; but for the regular clientele of the Wallace, myself included, the question remains: why should the building of a new theatre, however fine, put an older one, highly equipped, with a lovely versatile space, out of circulation? I could think of a hundred artists willing to rent it; but if the AUC does not want outsiders, I could think off hand of a dozen of its graduates running independent theatre groups and desperate for rehearsal and performance spaces.

But whatever becomes of the Wallace in the future, when it has finally retired from the limelight and hustle and bustle of theatrical activity, the memory of its rousing farewell will linger there for a long time after the party is over; and who knows but that one night, perhaps years from now, I may chance to pass beside it, when the streets are quiet and empty, and hear sounds of singing, music and laughter echoing within and floating out on the night air?

For a farewell production, Jim Jacob's and Warren Casey's *Grease* was a happy choice – not only on account of its palpable nostalgic

mood, perfectly in tune with the occasion, but also because its boisterous atmosphere, rock'n'roll tunes, and the explosive energy of its (save for Miss Lynch and Mr. Vince Fontaine) exclusively young cast are guaranteed to dispel any shadows of gloom and drown out, at least for the duration of the show, the feelings of loss and despondency that inevitably accompany last farewells. Set in the late 1950s, at a typical American high school, it presents a community of teenagers which seems self-contained, self-sufficient, and almost completely cut off from the world of adults. Strangely, though one does not notice it during the actual performance, those greasy teenagers do not seem to have any parents, social background, or belong anywhere except in Rydell High. You can scour the lyrics and dialogue as thoroughly as you like for any references to home, family or any life outside Rydell and its environs, but you will come up empty-handed; such references are prominent by their absence. This makes Rydell High something of a fairy land which knows neither time nor mortality and where the people enjoy eternal youth.

For the adult, cognizant of the fetters of time and conscious of its ravages, the trip into this imaginary, care-free world of *Grease* stirs wistful memories; one remembers the thrills and pangs of first love, the startling swings of mood between ecstasy and depression, the harrowing, obsessive doubts about one's looks, the involuntary urge to show off coupled with a pathetic need to be accepted by one' peers, the brash display of toughness to cover up one's sense of vulnerability, and, above all, the secret feelings of curiosity, guilt and fear about sex and the anxious groping for what is right among many conflicting models and images. Grease may seem an escapist piece on the surface, and has indeed been described as such. But underneath the surface

gaiety, doesn't the play sound a serious note? Can one fail to discern in the initial juxtaposition of Sandy and Rizzo and their final confrontation a kind of questioning of the sexual morality which underlies such widely circulated iconic images as that of the romantic, virginal sweetheart and its opposite, the trashy 'broad'? Indeed, while the majority of ordinary Egyptian young men and women may find it difficult to identify with the life-style of the Rydell crowd, they cannot but recognize in the Sandy/Rizzo musical debate over sexual conduct some of their own perplexing doubts and pressing dilemmas. No wonder the character of Rizzo (rightly interpreted and effectively rendered by Zynab Yaseen) and her crucial song, "That's Not the Worst Thing I Could Do", which acts as the turning point in the Danny/Sandy central love affair, made such a tremendous impact on the young Egyptian audience at the Wallace.

But *Grease* could not have touched such a chord or proved as relevant to that audience had not Paul Mitri wisely decided to stick to the original 1972 Broadway musical and ignore the more famous 1977 film version. In the former, the burden of this demanding performance is shared by the whole cast, while in the latter it is squarely placed on the shoulders of the Danny/Sandy couple; and though Omar Yaseen and Seher Mir (as Danny and Sandy) are reasonably attractive and competent performers, I doubt they could have taken responsibility for the whole show and emerged safely. In Mitri's production, they provide a central thread round which other themes and characters are woven; but they are by no means a hero and a heroine in the traditional sense. This allowed the other actors plenty of space to display their talents; and though most of them played well, with obvious zip and relish, and executed the difficult songs and elaborate dances accurately,

with graceful ease and passionate enthusiasm, one particular performance stood out, towering above the rest. This was Ramsi Lehner's as the clumsy, bungling, fulsomely assiduous and thoroughly ungainly bespectacled Eugene. All through the performance I had kept wondering who that brilliant actor was, and was quite bowled over when I discovered it was Lehner. I had seen him in at least half a dozen performances before, and yet he was able to fool me and transform himself completely into another man as if by magic. I do not know of another actor in his age group who could manage such a feat and firmly believe that with Eugene, Lehner has made a giant leap forward as an actor.

Those who have seen Mitri's *The Miser* and *Twelfth Night* know that, as director, he tends to use his sets as active, meaningful and even metaphoric components of the show. *Grease* was no exception. The prominent position of the live band at the back, high up on a platform towering above the stage, was a reflection, in physical terms, of the place music occupies in the lives of the characters, while the two mobile, huge steel towers, with their many bars and two cage-like compartments, suggested several meanings. As representations of buildings, they looked intolerably austere, bare and naked, with not one soft line or one protective wall in sight, and vividly evoked the slogan of 'functionalism', popular in the 1950s, and the rude, grim and soulless architecture one associates with it. The world of those youngsters seemed infested with monstrous steel skeletons (the creation of stage-designer Stancil Campbell) that could provide neither shelter, protection, privacy nor warmth. Yet, their shape, adaptability and spatial mobility suggested many of the paradoxes the characters displayed and felt: toughness and vulnerability; openness and

restrictedness; airiness and solidity; variety in content and severe conformity in outward form. Besides, the fact that, though ponderous and unwieldy, they could be easily moved and smoothly reshaped by the actors implied in a subtle way that however confused in their feelings, these young people were in control of their environment — even though it may be only a fairytale one — and had in their favour that most invaluable of assets: a sense of solidarity and a spirit of real camaraderie. There are many ways of saying goodbye to a theatre; but Mitri's production, with amateur actors, which harks back to the first 1971 performance of *Grease* in a disused tram shed, with an all amateur cast and newspapers for seats, is perhaps the best.

Art and Artifice

Yasmine Reza's *Art* at the AUC*

It is often drummed into us that friends should be completely open with each other and always tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth — so help them God. But how many friendships can actually survive this kind of uncompromising honesty? According to Yasmine Reza's international hit, *Art* (first performed in Paris in 1995 and recently at the AUC), practically none. At the end of the play, when the storm whipped up by Serge's purchase of an absurdly expensive white-on-white painting — which all but completely wrecks his 15-year friendship with Mark and Yvan — finally subsides, and the three friends decide on "a trial period" — "to try to rebuild a relationship destroyed by word and deed" (as Yvan reports) — Serge confesses to the audience in a monologue that he has already launched the trial period with a lie. For how could he tell Mark, who intensely detested the painting, that when he allowed him (in the previous scene) to draw a skier on his white painting with a felt-tip — to show him that he cared more about him than it, or the 200,000 francs he paid for it — that he knew all along that ink from felt-tips was washable? Serge's confession comes as a shock, a shattering revelation; what had seemed a heroic act of sacrifice (or madness, as Yvan calls it), an irrefutable proof of love, turns out to be nothing but a wise ruse, a cool, calculated deception.

Not that Mark deserves much sympathy; he shows none towards the follies and foibles of either of his two friends. In fact, there is a kind

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* 28.2.2002. In English.

of poetic justice in what Serge does to him. Throughout he refuses to concede that mankind, as T.S. Eliot wisely noted, cannot bear too much reality and desperately need their little, pathetic illusions. And what are friends for if they do not support these illusions? Ironically, it turns out that, rather than either of his two friends, Mark is the one most in need of such a life-supporting system. Though he is loath to admit it, his sense of self and human worth is completely dependent on seeing himself, his opinions and beliefs, and even the image he has of his own wife, Paula, reflected in his friends' eyes, particularly Serge's. When Serge goes and buys that white painting without consulting him, he feels cheated and viciously threatened: the blank canvas stares blankly at him, refusing to reflect back his image. What he sees there is his own nullity. And even when Serge allows him to draw himself back onto the blankness, it is only a temporary reassurance: the solitary man he draws, gliding downhill on his skis, in the falling snow, under the white clouds and against the white glow of the earth, eventually disappears into the white landscape — or, rather, he is removed "with the aid of Swiss soap with added ox gall". Though he starts off as a fierce mocker of deconstruction and postmodern art, Mark ends up savagely deconstructing everything, including himself, and seeing more in the painting he furiously despises than either Serge or Yvan pretend to do.

This deconstructive process, though tragic — despite its brilliant comic façade (which explains why Reza was surprised when the play was classified as a comedy) — is not, however, completely negative. As the solid friendship begins to disintegrate under the fierce gaze of the white painting — as illusions thin out and evaporate and all the protective shields are ruthlessly stripped, the three men grow more real,

more human, and, indeed, more sympathetic. They are forced to recognise that they have outgrown their youthful friendship, that their clinging to it is a fatuous attempt to shut out the reality of aging and the compromises it entails, and that, ultimately, when all illusions are stripped, we die alone — solitary figures melting into a white landscape.

Curiously, too, the play draws a lot of positive comic energy from the absent female figures who are constantly dragged into the argument by the men to be demolished, caricatured, used as pegs to hang on their frustrations, or as weapons of attack. Despite the distortions they undergo in the process, they come across as vivid, quite real, and, however irritating, deeply reassuring. They firmly anchor the three hazy men into everyday reality. You wouldn't catch Yvan's mother or step mother, his fiancée Catherine, her dead mother or step mother, or, indeed, Mrs. Romero — Yvan's mother's cleaning woman — wasting their time quarreling over a silly painting. Though absent and ruthlessly 'deconstructed' by the three men, they are simply incapable of melting away in a white landscape like Mark's skier.

Catherine's mother, though dead, is very much there for Yvan: "The day after the wedding," he tells us, "at the Montparnasse cemetery, Catherine put her wedding bouquet and a little bag of sugared almonds on her mother's grave. I slipped away to cry behind a monument and in the evening, thinking again about this touching tribute, I started silently sobbing in my bed." Mark's wife, Paula, makes her presence felt in the homeopathic palliatives she gives her husband to reduce his tension and the feelings of panic and anxiety that accompany male mid-life crisis. She is also the one who comes to the

rescue at the end and provides the recipe to remove the effects of her husband's and Serge's silly, adolescent prank. Serge's wife too, though less prominent than the other females in the play's background (she is alluded to only twice, and in a very cursory manner) is a key figure to understanding Serge. Her absence triggers many significant questions: why did she leave him? Did his relationship with Mark have anything to do with it? Why isn't she made free with as Mark's Paula or Yvan's females in the men's conversation? Are they afraid of her? Feeling guilty about her? And why did she suddenly insist, quite unlike her, as her husband says, on bringing him together with the children once a week at least, to his utter inconvenience? Was she trying to give him something more solid to hang on to as he slid, like Mark's skier, into the white landscape?

Teasingly, the play provides no answers and keeps us guessing afterwards; and this is where its real strength lies: in its gaps and blank spaces. It is often remarked by critics that *Art* is special because it eschews the all too conventional theme of the relationships of men and women. But does it? As far as I can see, it represents how men act when women are not around to control their destructive (or de-constructive) impulses. And for this text to work in performance, the audience have to be made aware of its nebulous background. The alternately brutal and pitiful male actors have to evoke those absent characters as forcefully as they can and build them as a frame of reference within which their muddling can appear as both absurd, problematic and heart-rending. And this is what Frank Bradley (as Serge), Mahmoud El-Lozy (as Mark), and Karim Bishay (as Yvan) achieved. Bradley's Serge was at once cold, aloof, and thoroughly vulnerable — at once like a man nursing a guilty secret, or a helpless

child in the grip of a bully, digging in his heels and doing his best not to cry. Using minimal gestures and facial expressions, Bradley strongly evoked the terrible sense of emptiness underlying the life of the professionally successful, outwardly self-confident dermatologist he enacted. In his performance, Serge's purchase of the white painting is obliquely revealed as a metaphorical act of self-identification. El-Lozy's Mark was, for the most part, appropriately tempestuous, oppressive and thoroughly irritating — altogether too much for anyone to cope with. But when he finally gets his way, or, rather, allows himself to be deceitfully reassured, he becomes like a little orphaned boy, beyond comforting, or like a man helplessly gazing into his own grave and you suddenly want to cry. Compared to him, and to Bradley's Serge, Bishay's Yvan seems luckier and much stronger. He manages to convince us, through his nervous, passionate outpourings, his vehement, emotional outbursts, his absent-minded tolerance of his friends' bickering unless he is forcibly dragged into it, and, above all, by his characteristic reed-in-the-wind-swaying body movement, that Yvan, though a clown and a failure (Mark calls him an 'amoeba') has a better chance of survival than either of his too friends — simply because he stares his own reality in the face without trying to camouflage it with talk of art, as they do. I knew that Bishay's Yvan had really got to me when I found myself remembering two lines from Yeats's *Second Coming*: "The best lack all conviction, while the worst / Are full of passionate intensity."

Brad Shelton's direction was smooth and muted, paying meticulous attention to the rhythm of the mood shifts as they flowed and ebbed and to the tempo of the dialogue. Rasha El-Gammal's set was simplicity itself and vastly eloquent. She structured the space into an L-shape,

forming an empty corner, with two elegant, imposing walls — forbiddingly bare — stretching on both sides and dwarfing the actors. The only exits from this corner are two doors, one at the intersection of the two walls, leading backstage, and another, facing it, in a straight line, leading into the auditorium. Significantly, the latter is used only by Yvan, while a glass-and-metal bar, placed outside the former accentuates the idea of the corner into which the two other men are trapped. Jeanne Arnold's costumes, ranging from neutral beige and crème for Serge, brown and beige for Mark, and black and white for Yvan, acted like subtle psychological hints, while Hani Arman's lighting and Hazem Shebl's technical directing guaranteed the seamless flow of the action in and out of the characters and between their respective flats.

In the play's programme, Bradley "thanks Pam for the idea of doing *Art*." I do not know who Pam is; but I would like to hug her for the pleasure and many insights this production has given me and a lot of other people.

The Fantasticks
at Al-Hanager*

The Fantasticks, by the Pegasus Players from Chicago, struck me as pale and soppy. The elements of burlesque and clowning — the main assets of the show, apart from the music — were cleverly used to satirise the moonlight fantasies and romantic longings of the two starry-eyed, next-door adolescent lovers, which are mostly drawn from literature. But when all the silly romantic bubbles of handsome bandits, chivalric heroes and damsels in distress are effectively pricked, what the play offers in their place as positive, enduring values are no more than the typically American traditional and often sentimentalised ones of home and family.

The play, a musical with some nice songs and catchy tunes, unfolds with the help of a kind of jinni-narrator and two down-at-heel wandering actors who live in a large chest of theatrical costumes. For the whole of the first part, which burlesques the story of Romeo and Juliet, it adopts a farcical style very reminiscent of the play about Pyramus and Thisbe rehearsed by the mechanics in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* for Theseus' wedding, including a man who impersonates a wall. That part was delightful, and so was the sequence which satirised the way cinema, television and pulp literature falsify our awareness of the world, covering up its nasty realities under a veil of romance. The satire, however, soon fades, and with it the delicious spirit of parody. As the lovers pass from innocence and gladness into

* 7.11.2002. In English.

experience and sadness, the play runs out of inventive steam and grows mushy and stuffily parochial in outlook.

At the end, true love triumphs, as it should in a typical American musical, and the parents' wishes are fulfilled; the prodigal son, who left to explore the world outside the shelter of books, home and family, discovers that it is a frighteningly alien and cruel place that ought to be shunned; like a wise boy, he goes back home to the faithful arms of his sweetheart and the kind bosom of his father. What a conclusion! And what an escapist, romantic illusion! In retrospect, one realises that the beginning was fake — a mere bait; the satirical debunking and burlesquing of the adolescents' superficial, romantic view of the world was ultimately intended to consolidate an equally shallow, one-sided, black-and-white, so-called adult view of life and foster a narrow-minded, self-enclosed and inward-looking attitude which shuns the 'other' as alien, and, therefore, a threat. It was too depressing a message which made even the sturdiest of spirits sag.

Reaching Out

An American modern dance workshop at the Creativity Centre*

For a whole month, American choreographer Kwame A. Ross — founder and artistic director of Prophecy Dance Company, among other things — worked concurrently with both the students of the Modern Dance School which opened last year and members of the Opera Modern Dance company. Both the company, which dates back to 1993 (though its corps de ballet has principally changed many times since), and the recent school are the brainchildren of Walid Aouni. The first was a dream come true; the second is intended to ensure that new blood keeps flowing into the company that this hard-won reality may continue to live and bloom. Though multi-talented as an *homme de theatre* — a dancer, painter, inspired choreographer, and exquisite scenographer — with long, professional experience in all fields, Aouni has preserved his childlike, avid curiosity about what lies outside of himself, both as man and artist, and is always looking about, reaching out for fresh experience, knowledge and new meeting points and sharing them with his students and dancers. This has led him to launch the Opera annual modern dance festival which has brought to Egypt some of the best companies and newest trends in Europe; and it is the reason why he made it part of the school programme to expose the students to varied choreographic styles and methods of work. Last year, Dutch

* 30.10.2003. In English and Arabic.

choreographer, Dreis Vanderpost, worked with them for two weeks, followed by another fortnight workshop with the French Olivier Rivereto.

This year, he cast his net further afar, to the United States, and with financial and logistical support from the cultural office of the United States embassy in Cairo brought Kwame A. Ross, and with him a magnificent, multi-talented composer and musician, Charles Vincent Burwell, who has collaborated with him over many works, composing, arranging and performing original music for various pieces in the Prophecy company repertoire. Both are Afro-Americans, with a keen interest in what they call "music and dance forms of the African Diaspora" and regularly practice teaching to transmit their knowledge and experience to young people. Both are currently working with the Urban Bush Women (an Afro-American company, based in New York, which consists of seven versatile female performers) and at the same time teaching at the Alvin Ailey American Dance Centre. This has made the workshop something of a double voyage: a reaching out to a different culture on the part of the Egyptian students and dancers; and a reaching back to their roots in Africa for Ross and Burwell. The rewards were immense, both sides declare.

Last Thursday was the time to celebrate the success of the project and also to say farewell. To mark this occasion a two-part or, rather, double-bill presentation was given at the cosy theatre of the Creativity Centre where the dance school is located in a spacious studio on an upper floor. The two pieces shared one overall theme framed in the title, *Stepping Out of the Box*, with each playing a variation on it. It was hit

upon by Kwame and the members of both workshops and not imposed by either party. The aching for freedom is daily reality for most young people in Egypt; and for Kwame and Burwell, it must have touched a deep chord in their racial memory. It also helped that Kwame, while working on expanding the dancers' and students' physical and formal skills, had wisely opted, in both workshops, for the expressive tradition in dance, adopting the aesthetic approach of influential teachers like Louis Horst and Doris Humphrey — an approach which, in Horst's and Carroll Russell's words (in their book, *Modern Dance Forms*, 1961), views "dance as expressing feeling through the natural languages of bodies and rhythms of life echoed in the essentials of choreographic form." The expressive tradition is better suited to budding dancers as well as to young ones of limited experience, such as the two workshops catered for. It would have been confusing and ultimately fruitless to have told them, as Michael Kirby Advises in his article, "Postmodern Dance" (*Theatre and Drama Review*, 19, 1975), to "cease to think of movement in terms of music," not to be "involved with such things as meaning, characterisation, mood or atmosphere" and that lighting and costume should be ideally used "only in formal and functional ways." Besides, such modern dance shows as have visited Egypt, and they are a blessed few, have never found favour with the public.

But Kwame's aesthetic approach was not expressive in the narrow, quasi-mimetic, over-generalised or self-involved personal sense. Someone once said that Afro-American art cannot help but be political in the widest and profoundest sense of the word. The same could be

said of all post-colonial art I suppose. In the lecture which preceded the presentation, entitled *Moving into the 21st Century* (in which we were treated to video glimpses of Martha Graham's *Duet*, Bill T. Jones' *Still Here*, Trisha Brown's *Two Duets*, Ulysses Dorcs's *Episodes*, Judith Jamison's *Hymn*, Urban Bush Women's *Bitter Tongue*, as well as a piece by Katherine Dunham), Kwame declared that though he had great admiration for Graham's style of "dancing through the heart", he was not himself a Graham dancer and went on to stress the importance of involvement with the community and tackling the many issues and challenges that face humanity in the new century. Though *Stepping Out of the Box* (performed in ordinary training gear with minimal lighting effects) anchored movement to some literary idea and a certain musical form in both parts, it went beyond mere self-expression, or bodying forth a theme in movement, to hint at social, moral and political protest.

In the first piece, performed by the school, a group of young people, like the ones you see on street corners, at clubs or on university campuses, stand chattering and giggling. Suddenly they break up and turn to face us in rows and gaze at us for a few seconds — expectantly? Defiantly? I am not sure. Whatever the interpretation, it was at once pathetic and disturbing. They soon regroup, then split once more, but this time, one by one and as each steps forward, they perform a sequence of improvised movements which expresses the way they feel about themselves, about the world, or some inner pain or longing. At some point, the live band (guitar, *qanun*, drums, a synthesiser), led by Burwell, comes into play and the group rejoin in a line, split into duos, trios or solos, moving to different beats and rhythms. The sequences

are once interrupted and at another point accompanied by verbal texts: the first, a poem, recited solo in Arabic by a female voiceover then in English by one of the dancers, is about two young lovers separated by a wall which, unfortunately has no hole in it as was the case in the story of Pyramus and Thisbe; the other is a two-line choral statement-cum-plea, chanted in chorus in Arabic then solo in English and Italian. It simply says that "if we loved each other a little bit more" there would be less human suffering; we could alleviate the sorrow of others "through the heat of our actions." The two texts thematically frame the performance, juxtaposing romantic love and human solidarity as variations or alternative routes to freedom out of the box of the self. The final part of the performance builds up human solidarity into a metaphor for salvation, imbuing it with spitiual, quasi-religious shades. The dancers regroup once more, forming a moving human mass which heaves forward laboriously in the dark, advancing towards a dim figure in a corner. They finally reach him, envelope him and carry him along a narrow path of red light on the floor. Blood? War? Sex? Life? Or all rolled into the one ambivalent mass we call experience? Is it the path towards maturity with all the pain, sorrow and violence it brings along?

At the end of the red path, the lonely figure they have embraced falls lifeless to the floor. They lift him up, in a manner vaguely reminiscent of the way Christ is picked up by disciples as he falls from the cross in paintings, and carry him forward. The sequence of falling and lifting up continues as they progress, this time a long a path of soft, golden light, towards a bright circle at the other end. There, the limp, dying figure is restored to life and consciousness. He gazes at the circle

of faces around him in wonder and touches their faces, first hesitantly, then gratefully and lovingly. At his touch, the dancers, one by one, seem to slip into a state of beatitude and glide away. Joyfully, almost ecstatically they feel their bodies, look around as if seeing the world for the first time, or like a newborn baby learning to focus for the first time. A ritual of Christian baptism or Islamic ablution follows as they mime washing themselves and splashing about in water; then they become children playing on the seashore and spattering each other with what we now feel is holy water while they embrace and whirl. Many will read the whole piece in the light of this final sequence and see it as a replaying in a different key of the old story of the Fall and the hope of redemption through Christ, but with the accent here firmly on human solidarity as the only hope, rather than a heavenly saviour or divine intervention. But regardless of any interpretation, what gives this piece emotional potency is the forceful clarity of the design coupled with the power of the music and the dancers' passionate sincerity and extreme youth.

The second piece, intended for professional dancers, was, naturally, more elaborate in choreographic and musical design but stuck to the same expressive aesthetic. Here romantic love and sexual passion face the might and power of repressive traditions, represented by the family, the community and even the military. The choreography follows a simple story-line, fleshing it out with forceful images, alternately sensuous and violent, and in every detail you could feel Kwame striving for a combination of vigour and tenderness — a synthesis of animal and spiritual energy. Though love seems to triumph as the

example of the two lovers incites the young people of the community to rebel and even seems to convert the older members to a belief in love or at least a tolerance of it, the piece ends on a wistful, faintly ironic note. In the final scene, the young woman and her parents form a tableau vivant, expressing the traditional image of the happy, loving family, bathed in a red light, while the young man stands across the stage, in a soft pool of white light. As the lights fade, the contrast between the red and white light spots suggests an implicit critical comment, even as the two lovers look at each other longingly and hopelessly across the darkness. It is an image that many young people in Egypt, longing to step out of the box and reach out to freedom will identify with and long remember.

A Light in the Heart of Darkness

John Dillon's production of Ariel Dorfman's *Reader* at the AUC*

Take a deep breath and jump right in; the rewards are countless. This is my advice to anyone who goes to see the Egyptian premiere of Ariel Dorfman's *Reader* at the Falaki Centre Mainstage Theatre. Tolerate the sense of vertigo that grips you as you slowly sink into Dorfman's subterranean watery regions and do not regret not having fortified yourself beforehand with a stiff drink; you will soon be seeing double. You will feel terror as well, and profound sorrow and pain; but in the murky depths of this stunning imaginative *tour de force*, this conundrum of a play, you will also find, despite the human wreckage surrounding you, wit and compassion.

Reader presents a disintegrating world which, despite its rigorous insistance on everyone observing the rules, the borders and barriers laid down by those in power, has completely lost its spatio-temporal boundaries and moral bearings — a world of splintered narratives and shifting images in which reality and fiction conflate and no story or identity can be ascertained or validated. The initial narrative is set in motion in the first scene by a mysterious, nameless 'Man' who grows more sinister as the play progresses and emerges at the end as an incarnation of the inhuman spirit of dictatorship and it omnipotent, omnipresent iron fist. Like a magician, he conjures up, with the gesture of a hand, the office of a censor, Don Alfonso Morales, in some

* 18.12.2003. In English.

unspecified Latin American police state. We watch the censor at work, banning, releasing or 'snip-snapping' the manuscripts of prospective authors. We soon learn that his wife had died young, leaving him a son, Enrique, and that he has an affair with his secretary, Jacqueline. The dramatic focus of the scene, however, is *Coming Together*, a "preposterous futuristic novel," according to Morales, which would be better called "coming apart." Morales's suggested title seems prophetic; the novel which Enrique had given his father, claiming it was by a friend, drives a wedge between them. The father suspects his son of having written it himself to ruin him by modelling the hero on him and implying that he had helped put his wife in "a Readjustment Centre" for her contumacy.

As the showdown between father and son builds to a climax, and just as Enrique is about to declare that he has proof and ask his father why he did it, what fear had driven him to it, the mysterious Man suddenly materialises, as if out of nowhere, standing behind the chair he had proudly displayed and carefully measured at the beginning. Now, however, a young woman sits in it, bound and gagged. Who is she? Don Alfonso's wife? Or the fictional one in the novel? But before we get an answer to this, or any of the questions raised earlier about the identity of the author of the subversive manuscript, the truth of the father's guilt and his motives and the nature of Enrique's proof, Dorfman tantalisingly interrupts the scene as the telephone rings. The lights go down and when they come up again we discover we had been catapulted in space and time to a different country and a future point in time. And yet, the same actors appear in the same roles, but with different names: Morales becomes Daniel Lucas, also a censor, but minus the limp, Jacqueline becomes Irene, Enrique becomes Nick.

More disorienting still is the fact that the situation, the web of relationships, the offensive novel, though under a different title, *Turns*, and the skeleton in the cupboard are the same. Even the system of government, pronouncedly a democracy, is equally repressive, though its forms of censorship are more subtle and sophisticated. Even the dialogue carries distinct echoes of the previous scene and seems a replay with variations.

Casting about for a way to end this confusion, one is tempted to read the second scene as a dramatisation of the "futuristic" novel Morales is reading. Or is it the other way round? Was the first scene a dramatic projection enacting part of the novel "set far away, long ago" that Daniel Lucas is now reading? As the play progresses, neither explanation works: The nameless 'Man' haunts both narratives; Enrique and Nick coalesce in Malko, the author of the objectionable text which can be at once *Coming Together* and *Turns*; the gagged young woman of the first scene is alternately identified as the betrayed wife of both censors and also as Sonia, Malko's wife, which makes you wonder if the story of this young, rebellious writer who is forced to recant at the end is not, perhaps, a projection of both censors in their youth when they still had what Don Alfonso calls "the writing fever."

As the characters surface from the darkness and eerily fade and dissolve into each other, as times and places merge, what we call reality seems to slip away; you experience something akin to delirium, the kind of anxiety and bewilderment we only know in dreams. You try to fix your gaze. "What country friends is this?" you remember Viola asking in *Twelfth Night*. But here, in Dorfman's fluid world, there are no shores and no answers and nothing can be resolved on the realistic

level. It is not a question of mistaken identities — though the phrase is trotted out twice in the play, in a pathetic bid for self-assurance; nothing as simple as that. Dorfman takes a familiar comic convention and carries it to lurid extremes — to the edge of madness. The only stable thing, the only fixed point of reference that remains in his whiling, swirling galaxy of images and reflections is a desperate commitment to love, freedom, human dignity and compassion, and a passionate faith in the value of resistance. But Dorfman's faith is never facile or sentimental; it is always tempered with a sad recognition of the voracious capacity of human nature to inflict pain on others in the name of security and self-preservation.

In his forward to *The Resistance Trilogy* which brought together *Reader, Windows*, and *Death and the Maiden* in one volume, Dorfman explains his choice of title. To have called the book "The Repression Trilogy or the Violence Trilogy or the Trilogy of Abuse and Suffering," he says, "would have been to miss what I hold to be most central to my writing: that it tries to place, hopes to place, in the very middle of history those who do not accept life as it has been established and narrated, the wager that the official version of reality handed down from above will always be contested by somebody, no matter what the cost to their bodies and sanity. It is their rebellion, our rebellion, which sets in motion the crisis which is at the heart of each play." In the trilogy, all the rebels are women. Why? "Because," as Dorfman explains, "women tend to be the least powerful, the most marginal members of society; when they do revolt, they do so with a determination, fury and dignity which cracks the world open, which compels authority to reveal itself in all its arbitrary ugliness. But women have also fascinated me because — and this may be why I have gravitated towards them as a detonating

factor over and over — their very lack of influence makes their insurrection extremely precarious. In order to prevail, they need to convince the men who hold power to change their conduct, they need to invade that masculine world and throw it into chaos, they need their version and view and gaze to be validated and verified and accepted. The plays do not, therefore, merely tell the story of the women who set history upside-down, but also of the men whose history is being directly challenged." Just before the end of *Reader*, the director of Moral Resources, the institution which decides what everyone reads, sees and hears, and who has efficiently liquidated all the female characters in the play, furiously exclaims: "These women, my God. Tanya, Sonia, Jacqueline, Irene. It's like a f–cking merry-go-round!"

The four women in *Reader* do indeed throw the masculine world into chaos; but neither their stories nor those of the men they challenge can be coherently summarised. It is one of those plays where meaning has to be sought in the structure. In an Afterword to the text, published in the *Trilogy*, Dorfman explains how it came into being — how a simple short story, intended as "a sort of prankish revenge against the censors who, in Chile, were banning ... (his) ... work and that of other writers," was slowly transmuted over the years into a complex play which explores through its very form "depths and dilemmas ... beyond ... (his) ... original idea" and the ways in which art intersects with human rights. "By forcing the protagonist to face the splits and cracks of his inner world," he says, I also was inevitably probing ... the questions of identity and trust in a world such as ours and asking myself and the audience about the fountains of creativity itself, the role of art in our times. And so the play ended up wondering how stories can be told at the end of this millennium, not only in societies that are

miserable enough to suffer dictators, but also in more affluent lands ..., in other words, how reality itself is constructed for us and by us and without us, how can we tell what is true and what is false if we do not simultaneously question power, if we have lost our capacity to separate good from evil."

Like the other two plays in the *Trilogy*, *Reader* is a mystery with no solution. "The ambiguity of the final solutions in each play," Dorfman goes on to say, "is directly related to the freedom I have wanted my readers and spectators to experience, the certainty that the story on that stage has not yet, in fact, ended, that how it really ends will depend on how we, who are also watching, act out our own lives. And the writer's confidence in the imaginary and its strength to transform the spectator is paralleled inside the dramatic world itself by the ferocious pull of the imagination on the protagonists, male and female, the way in which they are cornered, they have cornered themselves, into conceiving another alternative, a different possibility for humanity."

The intensity of Dorfman's political awareness is matched by a keen attention to aesthetic issues and technical matters. As a writer who was forced into exile by the Chilean military coup of 1973 and has since committed himself to give voice to all the victims of terror and place them in full view of the world, he constantly has to grapple with the dilemma of "how to write about matters that have extraordinary documentary weight without being subjected to the grinding jaws of a 'realism' that is often unwilling to depict the complexity of what is truly happening ... how to tell a story that was historical inasmuch as it derived from the suffering of real human beings but that simultaneously had to obey aesthetic and literary laws of representation that demanded

freedom from that immediate history," as he admits in an Afterword to *Windows* dated October, 1997.

On 30 September, 2003, Dorfman published an article in *The Nation* entitled "Lessons of a Catastrophe." In it, the disastrous attacks on New York and Washington on 11 September, 2001 were reflected in the mirror of the equally disastrous bombing of the presidential palace in Santiago by the Chilean air force, with the help of the USA, to overthrow the constitutional government of Salvador Allende. Under General Pinochet's regime, "(m)any otherwise normal, decent human beings in my land," Dorfman writes, "allowed their liberty — and that of their persecuted fellow countrymen — to be stolen in the name of security, in the name of fighting terror." In the USA, after 11 September, also in "the sacred name of security and as part of an endless and stage-managed war against terrorism, defined in a multitude of ever-shifting and vague forms, a number of civil liberties of American citizens have been perilously curtailed, not to mention the rights of non-Americans inside the borders of the United State," he warns. "The situation abroad is even worse," he urges; "the war against terror is used to excuse an attrition of liberty in democratic and authoritarian societies the world over." Though the USA has not become a police state as yet, it will do well to heed the lesson of the Chilean tragedy to avoid "similar political disasters in the future."

Was it a disturbing, nebulous awareness of this insidious erosion of civil liberties all over the world that prompted American director John Dillon to embark on a production of *Reader* as soon as he arrived in Cairo on 3 November as the Department of Performing and Visual Arts' 2003-2004 Distinguished Visiting Professor? "He cast the play before he got his first good night's sleep," Frank Bradley, the head of the

department writes in the play's programme. But whatever the cause of the urgency, it was a magnificent choice. The production had a tremendous liberating effect and everyone who had suffered the rigours of censorship here was delighted to finally see a censor hoist with his own petard. Ironically, though, the kisses in the text were cut out and body contact kept to a minimum, just as the Director of Moral Resources instructs Enrique and Jacqueline during the wedding ceremony he stages near the end as he rewrites the story of Don Alfonso Morales/Daniel Lucas. It was as if he had been following the rehearsals all along, censoring Dillon in the name of public morality, and was perhaps sitting among us in the auditorium. On the level of text and performance, censorship became a pervasive, oppressive reality that no one could elude.

Casting a woman as the Director was an ingenious touch and truer to life than Dorfman's rigorous division of his characters in female victims and male oppressors. In patriarchal societies where women are often denied their rights and fobbed off with the notion, fed into them from childhood by teachers, preachers and parents, that they are the guardians of morality and tradition, you will often find that women are the worst enemies of women and the most ardent supporters of the oppressive symbols of authority. Yara Atef's performance of the part was an exquisite blend of sardonic suavity and diabolical sadism. Ratko Ivekovic was at his best and dexterously juggled the parts of the two censors without slips or hitches — a splendid feat; his face, gait and intonation sensitively mirrored in every muscle and tone the different mental states of both characters as their inner worlds began to split and crack, pushing them to the edge of madness. Indeed, the whole cast was carefully picked and meticulously trained. Dalia El-Guindi as

Jacqueline/Irene, Lama El-Hatow as Tanya/Sonia, Asser Yassin as Enrique, Nick and Malko and Hany Seif as the Man gave convincing, well controlled and orchestrated performances and Jeanne Arnold's costumes and Stancil Campebell's lighting provided them with an intelligently supportive, protective visual frame.

The set, by Scott Wedlin, was another remarkable feature of this production. A row of tilted door-frames in the centre led to the back, creating the effect of a deep tunnel, while a set of panels on wheels, manipulated by the Man's black-clad, forbidding assistants (Diana Brauch, Dalia Kholeif, Vanessa Korany, Yosra El-Lozy, Wael Mohassed, and Shaymaa Shoukry) — an innovative departure from the author's stage-directions) — served to construct the different locations. At certain moments, they were wheeled round in circles at great speed, creating a strong sensation of giddiness, and at others they vividly expressed the instability and fragility of the world the characters inhabit. At the end, the six assistants join the Man and the Director at the back, forming a gruesome black wall which menacingly advances from the shadows toward the remaining victims, Daniel and Nick, to crush them. This is theatrically more effective than just having two men attack them, as in the text. As father and son shout out their defiance of fear in the face of this approaching terror, the lights black out. The defiant cries continue to ring in the darkness and we carry their message with us as we leave the theatre. They are "voices from beyond the dark," to use the title of a new work by Dorfman, and their message says: To break the wall of silence is not easy. First, you have to overcome fear. As their liberator says in his preface to *Voices*: "There is always fear at the beginning of every voyage, fear and its malignant twin, violence, at the beginning of every voyage into courage."

Messing With the Mind

A scathing anti-American political skit at Al-Hanager*

In a report entitled *Changing Minds, Winning Peace: A New Strategic Direction For U.S. Public Diplomacy in the Arab and Muslim World*, commissioned by the State Department and published October 1, 2003, the 13-member advisory group who prepared it under the chairmanship of Edward P. Djerejian repeatedly warn against the widespread and fast growing anti-American feeling in the countries they visited, including Egypt. On page after page one comes across statements like: "animosity toward the United States has grown to unprecedented levels"; "hostility toward America has reached shocking levels," or, "the bottom has fallen out of Arab and Muslim support for the United States." In Egypt, for instance, a survey conducted in 2002 revealed "that only 6 percent of Egyptians had a favorable view of America."

The report goes on to list the main grievances that Arabs and Muslims harbour against the U.S., some of which, it candidly admits, cannot be solely redressed through public diplomacy. Apart from the fact that the U.S. has become the only super power and self-appointed policeman of the world (though the report does not put it quite like that, opting for the gentler phrase 'the world's preeminent power') and what Arabs and Muslims "perceive as U.S. denigration of their societies and cultures" in the American media, the major source of resentment, it

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* 5.2.2004. In Arabic and English.

concedes, stems from America's foreign policies. "It is clear, for example," it says, "that the Arab-Israeli conflict remains a visible and significant point of contention between the United States and many Arab and Muslim countries and that peace in that region, as well as the *transformation* (my italics) of Iraq, would reduce tensions." In this respect, however, the advisory group are helpless: their "mandate is clearly limited to issues of public diplomacy." The report offers many astute, practical and level-headed recommendations; but without addressing the root causes of the problem, can one really hope for improvement?

I had read *Changing Minds* some time ago, and in the crazy melee of events that sweeps us along from day to day, incredulous, nearly stunned and half dazed, had almost forgotten it. But Khalid El-Sawy's *Al-Le'b fil Demagh* (*Messing with the Mind*) brough it vividly and disturbingly back to my weary and over taxed mind. It seemed like a response to, a dramatisation and confirmation of the findings of that report. It was the first day of Greater Bariam; I had spent most of the day with the family, had eaten more than I should to please my mother and had had endless discussions with my brother, on a fleeting visit from New York where he lives, about the prospects of the next American elections and the different candidates, ... etc. I had fled the family home to give my stomach, and mind, a break. I made my way to Al-Hanager and sat quietly sipping tea in anticipation of the performance. I knew from previous experience that El-Sawy's work was never light on the digestion — invariably loud, aggressive, and peremptory. That evening, however, anything seemed preferable to my mother's effusive culinary expressions of love.

The moment El-Sawy rushed into the foyer of Al-Hanager, with some members of his Movement independent troupe, all dressed marine-style, with helmets, waving mock guns, letting them off now and then with explosive bang bangs, barking abusive, mostly four-letter-word curses in the American slang at everybody in sight, and generally causing a terrible din and behaving like hooligans or, in view of the military getup, like brutal, thuggish security officers, I knew what I had let myself in for — the last thing I could have wished for on that evening: an agit-prop play and on an intractable subject that has become like our bitter daily bread: us and the U.S., or, more accurately, us and the Western Other, forgetting how together we have forged a wonderful, enlightened culture over centuries, despite the shambles of history. Time seems to hopelessly recede and we are back on the merry-go-round. It was then that I remembered the vicious circle of misunderstanding that has bedevilled us since 11 September — what that report I had read months ago had said about both the Americans and Arabs and Muslims being trapped in "a dangerously reinforcing cycle of animosity."

When I was a child I was often advised by wise elders that if someone abused me, I should not respond by hurling the abuse back at them; it is infinitely more rewarding, I was told, to stop and ask why, and examine myself honestly to find if there was some truth, however painful, in what they said and try to establish some sort of dialogue. Nowadays, neither party, us or the U.S. seems willing to do that. Though the official media here is careful to control or tone down any offensive, anti-American emotional outpourings, one would be a fool to ignore the tenor, pitch and resonance of popular opinion. Visit any mosque, any open debate at a university, any theatre, and you will

know what I am talking about. And it is not very pleasant. People are herded under one rubric (Arabs, Muslims, Americans, Christians, Jews, Asians, or what you will, regardless of the glaring fact of subcultures and ethnic multiplicity) and expected to behave according to a rigid set of precepts and practices imposed by god knows whom. Individuality seems to be dead and mutual distrust is advocated; things you, and others, have long believed in and cherished are branded as anti-Islamic, anti-Semitic or anti-national; the veil has come to be mandatory, the mark of female Islamic identity (in capital letters), though it has been historically a mark of female oppression in many patriarchal cultures and religions, and all the values that humanity has long cherished and fought for are claimed as the property of one set of people to the exclusion of all else.

What Khalid El-Sawy did in his *Messing with the Mind*, whether he meant it or not, was airing these dilemmas, albeit without giving much thought to their complexity. Consciously, he planned an agit-prop-cum-political-cabaret performance which used the modes of parody, grotesque, farce and meta-theatre and harnessed them together within the framework of a television phone-in-cum-talk-show with a live audience. Unfortunately, of fortunately for some, we, the hapless Al-Hanager audience, were the victims. Having been bullied into the auditorium, we discovered that we had been autocratically cast by the author-director-scenographer, sound and set-designer and star of the show, Khalid El-Sawy, into the role of *paid* Studio audience at a live T.V. show. And since the security were dressed as American marines, the message was, quite and tediously obvious, that our media, indeed our whole lives were run by the U.S.

The star of El-Sawy's mock talk-show was a U.S. general who managed to hold all the ropes of the Egyptian media in his fist, imposing 'decadent liberal' values (which accommodate peaceful co-existence and negotiated, peaceful settlements within the eternal triangle of wife-husband-lover — read Palestine, the Arabs or Palestinian authority and the United States) on everybody at gun point. It was hilarious, one has to admit, with a lot of witty punning, shrewd use of innuendoes, parodies of historical soap operas, well-known talk shows, some satirical, political take-offs of well-known Egyptian media stars and American musical style numbers, lots of video pick-ups of the scenes on stage taken live and projected simultaneously on a screen, which provided the scenic backdrop, to suggest, together with a few other carefully selected props, that we were really in a T.V. studio, participating in a live show, plus a good dollop of sentimental songs about the power of love to pore a hole into the mightiest of strongholds (the afore-mentioned report had gently satirised the new 83 million dollar consulate outside Istanbul which, though it "satisfies important security concerns," seems like 'a remote "crusader castle"'). As it transpired, the only solution the show had to offer after two hours of clowning around basic, crucial issues, was that the only way left to us to fight is suicide-bombing. Another round of mutual massacre and self-annihilation. The report I remembered, despite all its lapses and shortcomings, had recognised, at least, that we had to put a stop to the cycle of violence. And there I was, on a holy day, asked to carry a gun and decimate as many of God's beautiful creatures as I could. On the other side, in Israel and the settlements, people were asked to do the same, kill my nearest and dearest.

El-Sawi's *Messing with the Mind* was a timely reminder of what we are letting ourselves in for. If the media in the States and Israel is distorting us, eroding our individuality as human beings, and if we pay them back in a similar coin, distorting them out of all recognition, and granted there is a lot of injustice in the world, is the solution simply exploding yourself or bulldozing as many houses and people as you can, as the play seems to imply? *Messing with the Mind* was a deeply painful experience on both the political and existential levels. I would like to think it was cathartic for some. As for the actors and singers, I owe them an apology. This was an instance where art came too close to reality and it is to their credit that it did. I could imagine them doing their skit quite convincingly in many anti-war, anti-globalisation demonstrations all over the world. They would be quite at home in Paris, London, New York and San Francisco. So, what are we talking about?!

An American Take on Iraq

Naomi Wallace's *The Retreating Country* at the AUC*

When Yara Atef, a Theatre/Broadcast Journalism senior at the AUC, rang up to invite me to a performance she was doing at the Howard theatre as a senior project on 26 and 27 February, it did not occur to me to ask what the play was or who was directing. I had watched her in several AUC productions over the past two years and have been consistently impressed by her vigorous stage presence, her robust, unsentimental approach to acting and her intense, finely detailed physical interpretation of often difficult and complex parts, well beyond her years or scope of experience. It would be interesting to watch her tackling another part and see how far she has developed. "Lovely. Thanks for telling me," was all I said. The same evening I got a call from Ferial Ghazoul, an expatriate Iraqi professor of Arabic literature at the AUC, telling me there would be a play about Iraq written by a woman at the Howard on the same dates. It turned out to be the same perforamnce Yara had mentioned. I automatically assumed the playwright was Iraqi and this made the project seem more interesting. It is not often that one gets to see plays by Iraqi women, and there are such a few of them around.

I went to the Howard expecting a play in Arabic. There was a big crowd and a crush at the door. I was handed a programme as I squeezed my way through but did not get the chance to look at it. The

* 4.3.2004. In English and Arabic.

few minutes before the performance were taken up with finding my seat, watching more and more people streatming in and wondering with growing anxiety how many more that small hall could accommodate and whether there would be enough oxygen to go round. I was also frantically trying to shrink my legs somehow to half their size and stuff them under the chair to make a bit more room for the steadily growing rows of people sitting on the floor in front of me. And all the while I was grappling with a painful wave of nostalgia which assailed me as soon as I heard the old Iraqi songs playing in the background.

The singing faded as the lights dimmed. When they came up again, Yara, in old, faded jeans and a shirt was lying on the floor, straight on her back, holding a hardcover book that hid her face. If you didn't know who was playing you wouldn't be able to tell if the figure was of a man or a woman. This turned out to be significant later on when I discovered that the character in the original play was an Iraqi man called Ali. At that moment, however, it seemed of little import. Just a curious detail. She slowly sat up, trying to balance the heavy book first on three fingers, then on her head, carefully got up and walked around with it in measured steps before flicking her head back and letting it drop. When she finally spoke, telling us that nowadays expensive books like the one she had been playing with could be picked up at the side of the road for next to nothing, I was quite startled. She was obviously speaking of Iraq; but why in English? Still assuming that the writer was Iraqi, I thought that perhaps she had written the play in exile and meant to address an English-speaking audience or had wanted to distance her subject from herself emotionally to preserve its dramatic integrity and avoid sentimentality.

As the play unfolded, I became more convinced it could not have been written by any one but an Iraqi. The text spoke so intimately, so lovingly of "the land of palms" and its people and convincingly portrayed their terrible suffering during the period of economic sanctions: how they learnt to live with hunger, watched their wounds festering for lack of antibiotics, lived without electricity, running water or sanitation, relieving themselves by squatting side by side with dogs, and had to sell their most cherished possessions, everything they had saved from the past for "a future in a bucket of slops and potato skins." And the text did it with dignity, proud restraint, and even humour, never slipping into facile emotionalism. The text, though it spoke directly to the audience, approached its subject obliquely, with great artistic tact and subtlety, processing it through the consciousness of a sensitive, gentle person who loves books, poetry, pigeons and palm trees — things that keep cropping up, gathering shades of meaning all the time and slowly developing into structural, poetic metaphors. This focal consciousness speaks its suffering indirectly, through them, through the other characters it evokes, and by juxtaposing recovered images from the past with the ugly reality of the present.

What at first seems like random recollections in a moment of great stress, the confidential, inconsequential outpourings of a person anxious to unburden her feelings and share her sorrow with us, eventually reveals an intricate, poetic pattern of recurrent motifs, echoes and refrains, telling imagery and subtle metaphoric transitions. Themes are picked up, set aside, then taken up again in a different context and played in a different key, acquiring in the process, as mood and tonality change, dense metaphoric shadings which nebulously evoke other areas of related experience. They are continuously interwoven with pleasant

memories, harrowing memories, funny anecdotes, documented facts, hard statistics, snatches of poetry (Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, Hart Crane and Robert Frost) and two vivid vignettes of a family member and a friend.

The two portraits pick out the most distinctive and somewhat unusual features of their subjects and render them dramatically, with affectionate humour and loving care, through the words, voice and movement of the speaker. The first is of a beloved dyslexic friend, called Samir Saboura, who was tall and handsome, had big, black eyes, could tell jokes, recognise a book by its smell, recited poetry at the most inopportune moments and walked like a pigeon. The second is of a dear, eccentric grand mother, tall and hard as a big stick, who "drank her coffee out of a Campbell's Soup can" because she loved everything American, was a bit of a blasphemer, had only three teeth in front, sang her lullabies "like an old soft motor, clinking and clanking" and maintained "that song was not in the tooth but in the roof of the mouth, where God lives." As grandma Lak'aa Faseeh Zayer, as she is called, and the dyslexic Samir Saboura threaded their way through Yara's monologue, sometimes stepping into the centre, at others receding to the margins, they seemed to acquire a physical presence and become characters in their own right, as real as the speaker facing us who conjured them into being.

And because we get to love them, the news of their deaths and the barbarous, ignominious manner in which both are killed hit us with the full force of a cannon ball. The bare, simple, matter of fact style in which both deaths were reported and the eerily quiet and even voice in which Yara delivered the words contrasted sharply, disconcertingly,

with their shocking, gruesome, nauseating message, offsetting its horror. Lak'aa lay in her daughter's arms, "rotting from the waist down" and died of an untreated wound. "Little, pink pills of penicillin were all she needed." She couldn't get them because of the blockade which, the text tells us, also kills five thousand children a month. Samir Saboura's death was more insanely savage and more openly criminal. He had been conscripted into Saddam's army with the speaker. When the Iraqi army was defeated and the troops were surrendering, they walked together, arms raised, towards the American unit. Suddenly, "the commander of the U.S. unit fired, at one man, an antitank missile." The man was Samir and nothing was left of him but a piece of spine "stuck upright in the sand," and a torn, left hand "blown so high in the air it was still falling."

Laila H. Soliman's direction matched the text's economy, emotional restraint, technical subtlety, imaginative flair and poetic impact. The set, which she herself designed, was a small, semi-circular space, almost on the same level as the auditorium, bare except for a single chair and strewn all over with leaves torn out of a book. Some sheets of frayed sackcloth served as a backdrop, suggesting extreme penury and total deprivation, and were used near the end of display footage drawn from various sources featuring Baghdad in the past and present, and distressing scenes of devastation, with women and children fleeing in fear, like shadows flitting across a dreary landscape. There was also a mobile-like construction of twigs, strings and rags, looking like a ravaged birds nest, dangling from above, over an area near the outer edge of the performance space where it joins the auditorium. This was put to ingenious dramatic and poetic use towards the end, creating, as Yara set it spinning, a stunning visual metaphor of

whirling skies full of pigeons, with Yara's head floating happily among them. Though it suggested an exhilarating flight from ugly reality into a world of freedom, peace and happiness, the throbbing, gliding melody that accompanied it live, on Mostafa Al-Saiid's lute, carried an elusive hint of sadness while the fact that the pigeons were only twisted bits of paper, shaped by Yara in the course of the play and strung up round the nest, ironically undercut the sense of joy. The bits of paper out of which the pigeons are made, however, are the same pages torn out of books that we saw scattered around on the floor at the beginning. Joining books and pigeons in one image was an imaginative feat which rendered visually, in condensed form, the metaphoric dimensions of these two major themes and their musical interplay in the text.

The torn book leaves also served as an important aid to Yara's performance, and not just by giving her something to do as she spoke. The way she picked them up, slowly or hurriedly, pensively or frantically, deliberately or unconsciously, and the degree and type of energy that marked each act of twisting them into pigeon shapes visibly monitored the character's fluctuating emotional states, the rising and ebbing of nervous tension and the many turbulent feelings seething underneath the carefully maintained cool aspect, quiet voice, jocular tone and composed features. The movement of Yara's hands as she worked the paper formed an intelligent score which at times balanced, at others enhanced, and quite often counterpointed her vocal score. Besides, making paper pigeons in a situation like that — an ingenious device of Laila's invention — struck me as a highly credible, highly pathetic act of compensation for losing the real object — a comforting, imaginary substitute. And perhaps Laila and Yara also meant it to underscore, more than the text does, the speaker's childlike nature, her

love of play and fun, her innocence, as well as her painful vulnerability — features which deepen the pathos of her situation.

Despite its surface calm, its comic moments and general sophistication, *The Retreating World* was an emotionally poignant experience. I do not know at which point the tears welled up, but I know they kept streaming down my face till the end. And I was not the only one who cried. Some men were even seen with tear-stained faces. As I felt my way out, bleary-eyed and still sniffling, I bumped into Ferial Ghazoul. It was obvious she too had been crying. Embarrassed, I tried to find something neutral to say and heard myself asking her whether this Iraqi playwright also wrote in Arabic. It was not really something I wanted to know at that moment but it served the purpose. Ghazoul's reply, however, pulled me up. "But she is American, Naomi Wallace, you know?" she said. No, I didn't know, I said, and couldn't believe it. "Well, you'd better," she said. "It takes all sorts to make America."

When Laila Soliman kindly gave me a copy of the text (published in *The American Theatre*, July/August, 2003), I found a note describing Wallace as the author of at least four plays and "the recipient of the Susan Smith Blackburn Prize and an OBIE Award." How come I had never heard of her? I wondered. It was through the text that I discovered the speaker was originally a male — a fact the play's programme mentions, if only I had taken the time to read it. It also quotes her saying that she uses theatre "as a site for resistance" (which she certainly does in *The Retreating Country*) and stating that theatre "is as alive and immediate as the issues the plays deal with" (and no issue could have been more immediate than the blockade on Iraq at the time

the play was written in 2000). I confess I was mortified by my ignorance; but it was wonderful to be introduced to a new, exciting, exceptionally brave and fair-minded writer. What would I do without the AUC Performing Arts Department to fill in the gaps in my knowledge?

The Riddle of the Formicans

Constance Congdon's *Tales of the Lost Formicans* at the AUC*

Plays which feature aliens from outer space, UFOs, or flying saucers invariably put me off. Such creatures and objects, like all sci-fi creations, are better accommodated on the silver screen. On stage, especially in intimate spaces, the illusion is hard to sustain and, whatever the trappings and however elaborate, they end up looking ridiculous. This is exactly how the group of extraterrestrial anthropologists strike us in Lars Tatom's production of Constance Congdon's *Tales of the Lost Formicans*. They are paraded in all the well-worn cliches of the type — the weird getup, the metallic voice, the mechanical movement and rigid posture — and come across as childish theatrical fabrications that generate neither fear nor suspense — not even a little amazement — and defy any attempt at achieving even the slightest degree of the so-called willing suspension of disbelief. In this case, however, what would have been an unwelcome and seriously detrimental side-effect in another kind of play — namely, this abiding sense of the ridiculous — is worked into the structure in the interest of the overall meaning and total impact of the work.

The theme of the clashes of cultures, projected through the conventional plot formula of a traveller arriving in a strange land and trying to make sense of its people and their way of life, is used here as a starting point and the author capitalizes on its vast potential for

* 18.3.2004. In English.

generating comic contradictions, paradoxes and misunderstandings. But, unlike Gulliver or other fictional explorers, Congdon's invisible visitors to earth do not get seriously involved in the lives of the specimens they study or get changed by it. They restrict their activities to scientific observation and even the one experiment they conduct on Jerry (to discover what arouses him sexually), which might momentarily appear as violent transgression, does not affect him vitally in any way. Thematically, the aliens in Cogdon's play constitute a modern, comic variation on the chorus of observers and commentators familiar in ancient and more recent varieties of epic plays. Structurally, they function as a defamiliarizing device, providing a fresh and original perspective on material which, otherwise, would look traditional and mundane.

The aliens, though they seem more powerful, more in control and more rationally objective and scientific in their thinking than the human characters, are obvious parodies from old sci-fi movies, albeit projected in a spirit of gentle mockery. The way they puzzle over and describe familiar objects and phenomena is highly comical and injects into the play a sense of childlike wonder which unsettles our habitual, abstractive and utilitarian view of things and people. Gradually, the subversion of habitual modes of perception extends to the very concepts of time and place and life and death. Neither the temporal nor the spatial setting of the play can be clearly and comfortably delineated. At no point in the play do we feel certain of where we are imaginatively supposed to be time or place-wise. Nor are we ever quite sure if the human characters facing us are supposed to be alive or recorded images of long dead people replayed in the present.

The fact that the Aliens, with the exception of Jerry, are alternately "played by the human cast members wearing matching sunglasses," as the stage directions insist, and that, occasionally, they interfere in the sequence of the action, stopping it or playing it forward and backward as if it was already recorded on tape, makes a puzzle of the spatio-temporal setting of the action. Are we watching, at some hypothetical future point in time, a documentary about what life on earth used to be like before it became defunct? Or are we watching the making of such a documentary by a team of alien scientists in the time of the characters which is more or less contemporary?

The riddle is only partially solved, or at least seems to be, in the final great fire scene in which the three female human characters stand on a high place, watching excitedly as everything blows up in flames while munching Dilly bars and generally behaving like people at a fireworks show. When Judy hands round sunglesses as protection from the glare, the women immediately resume the identity of aliens they have been taking on and off throughout the play; this time, however, the conversion seems final. Cathy's elegiac statement, which precedes the final, surrealistic nursery-rhyme, says: "There were many Formicans long ago. Fifteen eras ago I lived with a small group. Their culture was complex, yet strangely intangible and the artifacts are a constant source of ... wonder." We imagine for a moment that everything has become clear: the aliens from outer space, we surmise, are really a metaphor for the spirits of people who died long ago and what we have seen of their former lives on earth were only taped memories or documented bits of human history. This places the temporal setting of the play outside human history, long after the human race has become extinct. However, the sight of Jerry, the

sexually-frustrated male nurse, entering to re-enact a suicide episode, involving a different, unnamed man, which Judy had described earlier in the play, puts paid to any such pat solutions. Humanity seems very much still around, unless, of course, you choose to view Jerry's action as yet another recollection dragged in at the last minute as an after thought.

Tales of the Lost Formicans remains something of a quiz till the end and the constant juggling of reality and fantasy, of the Aliens' and the human perspectives, does not allow for a full, coherent narrative. The stories of the characters, all mundane, are riddled with information gaps and projected in brief flashes that don't seem to build up to anything or lead anywhere. This structural strategy, however — which works against any logical, narrative sequence building up, making each scene almost an independent unit, and subtly plays the scenes against each other — has the effect of throwing the characters feelings and states of mind into sharp relief and focusing the thematic web of the play. The range of feelings and themes covered in the play includes failure, loneliness, frustration, disappointment, betrayal, despair, lack of communication, the fragility and transience of human life and love, the illusory nature of time, the unreliability of memory, the relentless decaying of the body and mind and inevitability of death.

But there is also affection, compassion, a glimpse of hope, the consolation of dreams and fantasies, and moments of mystical peace or elusive epiphanies. By the end of the play, one doesn't care whether the characters are aliens, spirits or living human beings; what ultimately matters to us and touches us deeply are Cathy's profound care for her father and son, Judy's plucky determination to try anything to go on

feeling alive, Evelyn's love for her husband and pathetic trust in the power of good memories, Jim's affectionate, unresentful nature and mechanical genius, Jerry's gentleness, compassion and intellectual curiosity and even Eric's fleeting moment of sympathy with his eighteen-year old new step-mother. Such intangible feelings, the play claims, will remain a constant source of wonder and are, in the final analysis, what redeems humanity.

Except for adding two extra aliens, providing special costumes for the aliens, including a particularly weird one with a skull mask in one scene, Lars Tatom's production closely followed Congdon's stage-directions. Apart from a door at the back, the square performance space which had the audience sitting on three sides, had no fixtures and the table and few chairs required in certain scenes were brought in by the actors and taken out by them at the end of the scene. This abstract set served for all locations and was shared by all the characters, alien and human; but though Tatom used every inch of it intelligently and moved his actors around it seamlessly and efficiently, one could not help wishing he had used a larger space, especially since the original seven-member cast was augmented by two. The actors seemed to crowd the space and were simply too uncomfortably close to the audience, particularly those in the first row; and this had the added disadvantage of putting the actors under the close, ruthless inspection of the audience and forcing us to notice, for instance, that Eric (Ahmed Sobhy) was in reality the same age, if not older than his mother (Dalliah El-Badri). The actors' voices, too, often seemed unnecessarily loud, and in the fights between Cathy and her son or her mother, Dalliah's shrill, piercing notes were positively painful. The aliens did what was expected of them, walking rigidly and smiling vapidly. Yehia El-Decken, as Jerry,

and Maha El-Swais, as Judy, skimmed the surface of their parts, delivering their lines but failing to go beyond them. The most convincing performances came from Nada Sabet as Evelyn and Ashraf Habashy as the Alzheimer victim, Jim.

I left the theatre with the impression that the production on the whole fell somewhat short of the play. But what really irked me, still irks me, is that I cannot discover whether the word Formicans in the title is meant to refer to creatures made of the heat-resistant, laminated plastic sheets containing melamine we use to cover kitchen surfaces, or is a derivation from the verb formicate to denote the ant-like status of humans on earth or what they might look like if seen from outer space.

Brief Reprieve

The Egyptian premiere of *Our Town* at Al-Hanager*

Sometimes the timing of a production can be crucial in deciding its impact on an audience. The phenomenal popular success of the recent *Messing with the Mind* at Al-Hanager is a case in point. Riding on the rising tide of anti-American feelings after the invasion of Iraq, it whipped up the audience's resentment against the policies of the Bush administration in the Middle East, turning the performance into a cathartic event.

That this vituperative piece of anti-American invective should be immediately succeeded, at the self same venue, with a production of an Amrican classic, staged by an American director and jointly sponsored by the American Embassy in Cairo and the Egyptian ministry of culture has caused some eyebrows to rise and triggered some ironical comments. One critic read it as a kind of compromise on the part of the ministry — "holding the stick from the middle," he called it — and an attempt to pacify the representatives of the American government in Cairo. Another, equally suspicious, saw it as a clever American ploy, perfectly timed to offset the damage caused by the Abu Ghraib notorious photos and persuade Egyptians that the American people and their culture were one thing and the Bush administration quite another (a moot point, some would say).

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* 3.6.2004. In Arabic.

To people with niggling, suspicious minds, not only the timing of the event but the choice of play too seemed significant, intended to gloss over the injustices suffered by the Iraqis and Palestinians by affirming that despite all conflicts and differences we are all essentially alike and partake of the same basic human experiences. Why else pick *Out Town* — a former student of mine asked — a play, she said, which predates any serious involvement of the United States in world affairs, nostalgically harks back in its temporal setting to a simple, more organic type of community and way of life, shuts off history in favour of a natural, cyclical view of human existence and argues that, in the final analysis, all human life is the same everywhere?

Her sardonic outburst reminded me of Roland Barthes' deconstructive analysis of a photo on the cover of a number of *Paris-Match* showing a young, black French soldier saluting the French flag. To him it was a bourgeois representation with an encoded ideological message intended to peddle the idea, or myth as he preferred to call it, that France's empire treated all its subjects equally. In another article in *Mythologies*, he had ironically exposed in a like manner the comforting and deluding myth he saw embedded in a photography exhibition intended to show that regardless of history, geography, economy or politics, human nature was the same everywhere. Ideology functions through myths, he claimed, representations or constructions of reality which ignore history and the socio-economics of their production to present themselves as natural, universal facts.

Is *Our Town*, with its quasi-documentary form and insistence on dates and facts, one such myth? Read in the light of Barthes' *Mythologies*, one could credibly argue, as American artists Ron

Vawter, Elizabeth Lecompte and their Wooster Group did in a 1988 parody of the play called *Route 1 & 9 (The Last Act)*, that the message of the play, though comforting, is somewhat specious and cannot stand up to historical scrutiny. Coming to the play fresh from watching on television the chaos and bloody clashes in Iraq, the dead and wounded in Gaza, bereaved mothers running after ambulances and dazed kids searching among the rubble of what was once their homes, it is difficult to see how anyone could expect us to believe that the lives and experiences of those unfortunate people were basically the same as those of the Gibbs' the Webbs or any of the other inhabitants of Grover's Corners.

It is true that death features prominently in *Our Town*; not only does the whole of the third act take place in a graveyard, all the characters in the play are also supposed to have died long before the play starts and only live as memories in the mind of the godlike narrator/stage-manager who conjures them up at will. But to argue that because death comes to all, it is a "leveller" of all would be crass casuistry. The way people die matters, and the quality of their lives before death matters even more. The final hymn to life Emily sings from the gave speaks of a loving mother and father, wall clocks and sunflowers, good food and freshly-made coffee, hot baths, clean, ironed clothes and warm beds. The play celebrates these simple pleasures and urges us to do the same. But it is exactly those simple pleasures, which the citizens in peaceful Grover's Corners take for granted, that are denied to many people in Iraq and most people in Palestine.

Our Town, nevertheless, is a prestigious world classic and remains, whatever reservations one may have about it, technically intriguing, especially in its treatment of time, and profoundly moving. It was chosen with the best of motives no doubt, and but for the timing would have seemed an excellent choice. The timing, however, was neither deliberate nor premeditated as some would like to think. If someone must be blamed for it, it has to be Mr. Bush. The idea of launching a collaborative theatre production with an American director and Egyptian actors and technical crew started months before the American invasion of Iraq. Director Seth Gordon, of the Cleveland Playhouse, was picked for the job and after some deliberation over possible texts it was decided that Thornton Wilder's 1938 Pulitzer-winner, *Our Town*, was a safe choice.

Tame, indeed prim by today's standards, free of verbal gimmickry and quite accessible in terms of story, setting and characters, and with a universal theme to boot (what could be more universal than 'Daily Life', 'Love and Marriage' and 'Death' — the titles of its three acts?) it seemed guaranteed to offened none and please many. An ordinary Egyptian middle-class audience would immediately identify with the characters' moral conservatism, especially in sexual matters, and their deep attachment to church and hometown and would heartily sympathize with its traditional view of men and women (women are virtuous but have weaker nerves, men and morally fallible but strong and dependable) and its strict definition of their distinct roles and spheres in life (father works outside, mother slaves in the home). It also had the added advantage of a big cast which would involve many Egyptian actors in the project. The old translation was deemed unsuitable — too rigid and a bit inaccurate — and so, a new one was

commissioned and promptly executed. But just when everything seemed ready and poised for the start, the Bush administration put a spanner in the works and launched their military campaign on Iraq.

A postponement was inevitable. When the project was revived a year later, politics seemed to be still grimly dogging its fortunes. All over the media, gruesome images of hooded Iraqi prisoners and wailing women outside the barbed wire fences of Abu Ghraib alternated with shocking, gory ones from Gaza. To put off the project once more, however, in the hope of better times was impracticale; indeed, since the situation in Iraq and Palestine keeps getting grimmer by the hour, with no signs of letting up, it would amount to putting the whole idea in cold storage. Better now than never, it was decided.

The play opened at Al-Hanager Centre last Tuesday where it played five nights to good houses before closing to prepare for a tour of Fayyoum, Menya and Ismailia. Seth Gordon had auditioned scores of actors before picking an excellent 20-member cast led by Sayed Ragab as the narrator/stage-manager, Salwa Mohamed Ali and Mohsen Hilmi (her husband in real life) as Dr. and Mrs. Gibbs, Ahmed Mukhtar and Azza El-Husseini as Mr. and Mrs. Webb, Shady El-Dali and Dalia El-Guindi as the young romantic couple: George Gibbs and Emily Webb, Tariq Sa'id as constable Warren and Hamada Shousha as the unhappy, drunken church organist. His direction meticulously followed Wilder's text and stage directions (as he had announced in a press conference a week before the opening), sticking to the play's three-acts-and-two-intervals arrangement (rarely used in Egypt nowadays) and attempting no new reading. With a minimalist set, consisting of two door-frames, two step-ladders, a couple of tables and a few chairs,

period costumes and no props or accessories of any kind (as Wilder insisted), Gordon and his artistic team — Effat Yehya (assistant-director), Sa'd Samir (lighting-designer), Jennifer Ferguson (costume-designer), Nayer Nagi (music), Maged Munir (sound) and Manal Ibrahim (stage-manager) — treated us to a solid, smooth, traditional production which relied on the power of the acting to communicate the poetry of the text and body forth its thesis and message. Both came across quite vividly: while the thesis comfortingly assured us that people were the same everywhere, the message told us that life was wonderful but all too short and, therefore, ought to be valued and celebrated every minute.

Of the five performances presented at Al-Hanager I watched three and every time I hated the play's parochial stuffiness, thought that Simon Stemson, the church organist, was absolutely right first to take to alcohol then hang himself in order to escape it, loathed Emily when she spoke of women's weaker nerves and didn't believe for a minute that everywhere people's lives were basically the same. And yet, every time I cried, not knowing why. It could be that the play's innocent blindness to the evil in the world sharpened my awareness of the tragedy we are daily living through, of the pain and suffering all around. By contrast, it seemed to offer a vision of the world before the Fall and innocence is always moving. Who knows? May be a play of this kind is just what people need in times of terrible stress. Gentle, lyrical and nostalgic, it could give one a welcome respite, like withdrawing into some kind of peaceful, restful retreat. What is wrong with some escapism?

Arab

A Dearth of Mirth

Journées Théatrales de Carthage*

In the grave-diggers scene, Hamlet stumbles upon the skull of Yorick — a "fellow of infinite jest, of most excellent fancy." Gone are his gibes, his gambols, his songs: the clown is dead, and nothing remains of him but the macabre grin of death.

The image of Yorick haunted me during the week I spent in Tunis to attend the 6th International Festival Journées Théatrales de Carthage. Laughter, I had been told, would be the central theme this year; but of laughter I found very little, and that little was hollow and devoid of mirth.

Ominously, the Festival's poster which greeted us at the airport showed a dead clown, sprawled on a stage, with the curtains down. On top of him, on one side of the red curtains, a huge, ugly mouth gaped open. No wonder that many of the papers delivered at the major symposium which carried the title *Theatre et Rire* dealt with the close link between laughter and death, both in modern European drama and in many African folk traditions. Laughter as an affirmation of life in the face of death, as a mockery of death, was a recurrent motif. But who wins in the end? Doesn't the warm, living smile invariably give way to the grin of the skull?

In the morning, we pondered the death of the clown, and in the evening, the smell of mortality chased us into the theatres and clung to the shows. No happy endings here, but a lot of sad ones and plenty of

* 28.10.1993.

corpses. Tunisia alone supplied no less than seven: four in Fadil Ja'aybi's *Familia* which used the murder-mystery formula to argue, in a grotesque, quasi-surrealistic manner, the unknowability of the truth; Ionesco's *La Leçon*, adapted by El-Habib El-Sa'idi, gave us another one, since it ends with the murder of the student at the hands of her deranged professor; *Makki and Zakiya*, a one-man show proficiently conducted by Lamin El-Nahdi, ends with a suicide; an adaptation of *Carmen* ends, naturally, with the destruction of the heroine, while Mohamed El-Edrisi's modernisation of the legend of Don Juan (which he sets in a place reminiscent of present-day Beirut) ends with the fire of civil war engulfing everybody, including Don Juan, of course.

The hell of civil war again provided the subject of Lebanon's *Rabbits and Saints*, while the current deplorable upheavals in Algeria formed the theme of the Algerian one-woman show, *The Wounded Smile*. How any of those shows (plus Zaire's *Misery*, or Syria's *Before the Snow Melts* or *Before the Thaw*, or Libya's *The Living Dead*, or Iraq's *The Lost Existence*, and a host of other plays) could be ranked as comedies quite beats me! Even the term 'black comedy' would not serve the purpose in many cases. I felt duped; who is laughing at whom? I had come looking for *Le Rire* and everywhere I turned I saw nothing but misery and *la Mort*.

But this is not the whole story. Arab theatre festivals are notorious for their lack of organisation. But this time the confusion and disorder were monumental. It was like watching a great edifice crumble right before your eyes. We arrived at the airport at 4.15 to be told that the opening ceremony would take place at five! By the time we reached the hotel it was already 4.45! At the Municipal theatre where the opening

took place we heard rumours that Lenin El-Ramli's *El-Kabous* (The Nightmare) was playing the same evening — but where and when? Nobody could tell us. The following morning we went in search of El-Ramli and found him in a white rage. He had already submitted a written, formal complaint to the Egyptian ambassador in Tunisia. *El-Kabous* had been assigned to an out-of-the-way, ill-fitted and ill-equipped hall and was given no publicity. The result? Only 30 people attended, most of them embassy staff. What about *In Plain Arabic* which was supposed to come to the festival? The Tunisian authorities got cold feet at the last moment and decided to forget it. Star comedian Mohamed Subhi, a guest of honour, and the director of the play, took the matter up with the director of the Carthage Festival, El-Munsif El-Suessi; but the dialogue yielded nothing except the confirmation of our need for more democracy and freedom of speech in the Arab world.

But El-Ramli was not singular in his calamity. Other artists suffered a similar fate, and the frustration at the lack of publicity and information was unanimous. I, myself, spent the whole of the three first days chasing after simple, honest-to-God facts and could not find them. The date I was supposed to deliver my paper, or my 'colloque', remained a mystery until 12.30 the night before, and going to the theatre felt like a proper pot-luck game. When the festival's book, or catalogue, finally arrived, I was advised not to depend on it for programming my viewing scedule. 'There will be lots of changes,' I was told.

Fortunately, I did not lose much. Much of the festival was a rehash — things one had already seen in other festivals; the two Iraqi entries, for instance. I saw in Baghdad as far back as 1987, and *Familia* was with us last month at the Cairo International Experimental Theatre

Festival. Do we detect here a sign of imminent collapse, or the cold touch of the skull?

But rire or no rire, skulls or no skulls, and despite the depressing prognostications of some Tunisian intellectuals that "this is the last Carthage Festival," the week was not without many rich compensations. France's *Garcon un kir*, with six magnificent clowns and their exciting antics, inspired by the techniques of the old silent movies, gave us a wonderful insight into the power-game and ended up sharing the banquet they have so arduously and crazily prepared under the grim, censoring eye of the head-waiter, with the audience. It was a show of pure, unadulterated joy and humour — a festive celebration sans the pollution of mortality. The dead clown of the Festival's poster here came to life and we revelled in his cheeky, outrageous hilarity. Here, with the Compagnie Fiat Lux, one finally found the kind of laughter that could have amused Prince Hamlet and compensated him for the loss of poor Yorick.

Acting on Arab Unity

The Cairo Arab Theatre Encounter*

Finally, after much wrangling over authority and financing and a lot of heated controversy over ends and objectives, the minister of culture has given his blessing to the long-debated Cairo Arab Theatre Encounter and set a definite date for it — 15 December. The idea is not new; six years ago, when Farouq Hosni came up with the idea of the Cairo International Festival for Experimental Theatre, the traditionalists among theatre people were chagrined and thought that the minister was putting the cart before the horse. Cairo, it was then passionately argued, should first host its Arab neighbours before branching west-ward and outward; it was shameful, the somewhat jingoistic argument went on, that Baghdad, Damascus and Tunis should have their Arab festivals and not Cairo — 'the capital of the Arab world'.

The fact that the Arabs have been participating regularly in the Experimental Festival with shows which, with very rare exceptions, leave a lot to be desired, has not abated the zeal of the 'Arab Festival' champions. Last September, the idea gained momentum when Hussein Mahran, the head of the Cultural Palaces Authority, offered to sponsor it and a preliminary organising committee was set up. This independent move, together with the mounting pressure in the press finally forced the minister's hand. Against his better judgement, he brought the project under the umbrella of the ministry; it was obvious by then that the drive behind it was more political than artistic, that what many of its

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* 26.5.1994.

advocates had in mind was a demonstration of Arab unity led by Egypt, not a demonstration of Arab theatre.

Long and arduous negotiations followed touching upon all points, from ideology to finance; in the process, the rampant ambitions of the enthusiasts were checked and curtailed; they settled for an 'encounter' — an extended seminar on Arab theatre — instead of a festival, for a limited number of participants and rigorous conditions for the visiting shows. One such condition is that they should not have participated in any other Arab festival before. This in itself would drastically limit the number of participants since many Arab countries produce only one worthy show a year (at best) which they subsequently parade in all the available Arab festivals, including the Cairo International Festival for Experimental Theatre. Such a measure has guaranteed at least that the same Libyan or Yemeni show will not be seen in Cairo twice in the same year. Having settled the shape of the festival and the topic of the seminar (the eternal 'tapping the cultural heritage in the Arab theatre' — what else?), there remained the problem of finding a suitable date for it in an already crowded cultural calender. Three dates were set then set aside in succession before hitting on 15 December. One cannot help wondering if the 'encounter' will really take place on this date or whether it still has any credibility in the eyes of our Arab brethren.

So far, the available information is extremely scanty. Apart from the names of a few distinguished Arab theatre personalities, we do not know what to expect. On the Egyptian front, however, I find us sadly unprepared for this encounter. It is not that there is a scarcity of shows drawing on the cultural heritage — the theme of the encounter; in fact, there are far too many of them, as the four Cultural Palaces local

festivals held simultaneously in Suez, Ismailia, Mansoura and Cairo last month testify. It is that the quality of the majority of productions is deeply disheartening — not surprising, since most of them were hastily scrambled together when it was thought that the 'encounter' would take place in March. About the only two that could safely represent Egypt without causing its theatrical reputation permanent, grievous damage are *The Man of the Castle* and *The Hilaleyah Sira*; the rest should be firmly consigned to oblivion. It is surely one thing to encourage young people all over the country to make theatre for their own pleasure and the entertainment of their communities, and quite another to drag them under the cold, critical gaze of our consistently carping and denigrating Arab brethren. If we must have another festival (and I do not really see why we should) and if it must be an Arab one (although in most Arab countries theatre is a marginal and sporadic phenemenon), the least we can do is be careful as to what we put on show.

Behind the Scenes

The Arab theatrical encounter: A sequel*

Finally, after many postponements and a lot of confusion and bitter wrangling, the Arab theatrical encounter will open tonight at the National, and barring any further organisational mishaps, it will provide the diligent theatre-goer with a comprehensive panorama of the state of the Arab theatre today. Thirteen Arab countries, including Egypt, are taking part in the festival which leaves out only Iraq, Sudan, Yemen, and a few Gulf states. Of the visiting performances, Roger Assaf's *The Memoirs of Job* (Lebanon), Izz El-Din El-Medani's *The Book of Women* (Tunisia), Mamdouh Udwan's *Safar Barlak* (Syria), Algeria's *Roots* and Morocco's *Try Your Luck with Sharks* sound promising. Palestine's originally nominated *Jericho in the Year Zero* was suddenly replaced by an amateur production from Gaza called *The Pot of Oil.*

Initially, Saudi Arabia and Libya wanted to bring three shows each — a curious fact in view of the total absence of regular public theatres in the two countries. The Egyptian side responded by informing them that they would host one spectacle and a limited number of artists at their own expense, but that the Saudis and Libyans were welcome to bring any number of shows so long as they assumed financial responsibility for the additional troupes. It is not clear yet (three days from the opening) how many shows they will actually bring, but together with the contributions of Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates and Qatar, the performances from these theatre-impoverished countries

* 15.12.1994.

will account for more than half the theatrical fare on offer. In the central seminar too, on theatre and the Arab folk heritage, Saudi Arabia and Libya are heavily represented, with five participants from the former and three from the latter. It beats me how in the absence of any theatrical practice anyone can churn out so much theory. One good thing however may come out of this paradox: the widely publicised Saudi presence may convince some of our bigoted fundamentalists that theatre is after all legitimate and not *haram.*

On the Egyptian side, nine productions will hopefully be taking part — though two of them are not yet quite ready. Of the nine, six come from the Cultural Palaces Organisation — *Muhrat El-Waqt* (The Horse of Time) from Beni Mazar; *Hilm Yusef* (Joseph's Dream) from Port Said; *Ya Tali' El-Shagara* (O Tree Climber) from Zefta; and *Antara, El-Su'ud Lil Qal'a* (Ascent to the Citadel), and *El-Shuttar wa El-'Ayareen* (Thieves and Tramps) from Cairo. From the State Theatre Organisation, there are only two production: *El-Hilaliyah* and *Scheherazade* (an eloquent testimony of that body's chronic lassitude), and from the Free Theatre groups we have only El-Warsha's *Tides of Night.*

The appointed viewing committee (which started off with ten members but soon dwindled to four) worked smoothly and diligently over a month without any substantial disagreements. Trouble began over the choice of the two shows to represent Egypt in the contest. Of the 16 performances we had watched, the best by far was *Tides of Night.* But although three out of the four members acknowledged this fact, it was not chosen. The reason was not the belligerent, abusive assault launched by the fourth member against El-Gretly personally and

his plays (his words echoed vividly some poisonous and libelous attacks on El-Gretly a couple of months ago in the Egyptian press). The chairman of the committee, himself very sympathetic towards *Tides of Night*, argued that we would come in for a lot of criticism for choosing an independent group to represent Egypt: "It would be a slap on the face for the State Theatre Organisation." Some journalists too, it soon transpired, had rung up the chairman to warn him against such a choice. Talk of press terrorism! The best course, he argued, would be to choose one show from the two rival state organisations, and so the State Theatre's *El-Hilaliyah* and the Cultural Palaces *El-Shuttar wa El-'Ayareen* were voted to represent Egypt by a three to one majority. Personally, I would have chosen the latter play, plus *Tides of Night*.

Once this problem was resolved, another reared its head. The viewing committee had been entrusted with the choice of performance for the opening night. Meanwhile, Sayed Radi, the head of the State Theatre Organisation and a sometime director, had taken a solo decision to open the festival with a hastily scrambled musical affair called *Mawwal El-Hob* (The Ballad of Love). When the committee rejected both script and spectacle on artistic grounds, hell broke loose; the power struggle over who controls the festival, which had been kept discreetly out of sight so far, became violently clear. The members of the committee were urged to let him have his way. They refused and threatened to withdraw. Their final report proposes *El-Hilaliyah* for the opening, but with Sayed Radi feverishly rehearsing his silly and discordant *Mawwal* at the National who knows?

It is widely feared that Radi, who by dint of his position controls six of the major theatres of Cairo, may put a spanner in the works.

Apart from the rejection of his own show, the fact that the Cultural Palaces are represented by six productions against his two cannot be counted on to mollify his rage. Three days before the Encounter, with no timetable in sight and very little information available, one cannot help wondering if the event will run smoothly.

Arabian Nights
The Arab Theatrical Encounter*

Last week felt like one long orgy of sadistic theatrical battering and hoarse slogan-shouting. The victim was, as usual, the audience, including yours truly. Rarely, you stumbled upon a good show; but whatever momentary pleasure you got out of it was rudely swamped by what followed and chased it out of your memory. Going from one show to the other felt like battling your way through a riotous mob of confused sounds and chaotic images.

It all started on Thursday 15, the day the Encounter began. Making your way to the National on a weekday is, at best, a gruelling experience; on a Thursday evening, it can be a real nightmare: the crazy traffic of Ataba Square — no longer a square but a labyrinth: the senseless, befuddling traffic detours, the giddying twists and turns, the not uncommon moronic pedestrian who hurls himself defiantly right in front of your car in gleeful desperation, and the trundling, elephantine buses nudging you gently onto something faintly resembling a pavement or a gutted mid-road isle.

Perspiring in mid winter, half dazed with the maddening din, you thread your way through a sea of troubles, but by opposing you do not end them. Lucky Hamlet! His choices were simpler and nobler. And having borne the slings and arrows of the barking silhouette of a traffic warden, busily scribbling in a tattered notebook (a pound hastily and surreptitiously thrust into his hand might save you a fine, if you could

* 29.12.1994.

only reach him), and having had plenty of time to savour and debate the originality of the salacious abuses slung at you from a scraggly line of street-vendors' carts, above their blaring radios, not to mention the contribution of the odd passer-by and the intermittent tapping on your window by beggars who send through the glass a faint, lugubrious chant, half threatening, half pleading — having stoically borne all this, you reach the gates of the National to be greeted by a wall of black-clad security men in gleaming helmets, waving their shiny walkie-talkies, and gruffly shooing you off the premises.

Once inside, you fight your way through a tumultuous crowd in a terrible crush for seats. Oblivious of the fact that the National seats only 500, the Encounter's executive committee issued 1200 invitations. Wondering aloud why the ceremony was not held at the more spacious Opera house, I was nudged by a colleague who whispered knowingly that it had become firmly connected in the minds of the organisers with the Experimental Festival and foreign culture in general. Suddenly I understood the significance of those sixties patriotic songs blaring out in the auditorium. Ours was not a theatrical but a political gathering of a definite colour. The Opera did not semiologically fit the bill; the National, on the other hand, was ideal for recreating and reliving the Nasserite dream of Arab unity. For a moment, I lost my temporal bearings; it was as if I had been whisked back in time to my school days and was about to be herded out of the class-room, as happened one memorable day, and shipped on a bus to Tahrir Square to sing Mohamed Abdel-Wahab's *Watani Habibi El-Watan El-Akbar* (My beloved homeland, my larger homeland). The same song was playing now and on stage the flags of the different countries taking part stood proudly in a semi-circle. But as soon as the speeches began, I was

jolted back to the present and to my cautious suspicion of all jingoistic dreams and nationalistic ideals. Cynically, I noted how one speech was lavishly embroidered with verses from the Qur'an while the other two sounded highly inflated and embarrassingly anachronistic. The fourth, on the other hand, by the minister of culture was mercifully, if somewhat startlingly, brief.

Beni Hilal, the play chosen for the opening, was very much in line with the spirit of the evening and the whole Encounter. It dramatises the popular folk saga, *Al-Sira Al-Hilaliyah*, as a thinly-disguised allegory of Nasser's reign and projects him, through the character of Abu Zeid El-Hilali Salama, the leader of the Hilaliyah tribe, as both tragic hero and fallen idol. I saw the production earlier this year and reviewed it on this page on 31 March.(*) It was satisfactory then, and has not changed since. But theatre is a living thing and easily affected by its surroundings; the production which seemed bold and exciting in the cool atmosphere of Al-Salam theatre, in March, looked and sounded tame and distant on this occasion. In the hectic atmosphere of the National that night, and in the presence of all those Arab brethren from Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states in their traditional dress, the absence of any reference to Egypt in the *Sira* became disturbingly clear, and I could not help wondering if the whole *Sira*, with its setting, tribal feuds and 'desert' values was not completely alien to an agricultural civilisation like Egypt's? I kept my thoughts to myself; in such a gathering they would seem sacrilegious. I even tried to suppress them;

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* See *The Egyptian Theatre: Plays and Playwrights* (by the same author), GEBO, Cairo, 2003, pp. 264-272.

but the following evening, as I watched Saudi Arabia's *Al-Qafila Taseer* (The Caravan Marches On), they reared their obstinate heads.

Once more, the theme was drought and the dream of green valleys; and although *The Caravan*, with its simplistic black-and-white conflict (visually translated in the costumes) and its clumsy striving after an expressionistic style, cannot begin to compare with Yusri El-Guindi's dramatic version of the *Beni Hilal Sira*, the common ideological roots of both productions are striking. But themes and technique apart, the Saudi show had one electrifying moment — a male-rape scene, or, at least, that is what it looked like to the gasping audience.

The Kuwaiti *Nawakhizah* (the colloquial word for pearl merchant) had no such sensational moments. The flimsy plot, which sought to portray the harsh life of the pearl-divers in pre-oil Kuwait and their conflict with the greedy pearl merchants, was frequently drowned in loud group singing, rhythmical clapping and deafening drumming. Not that it mattered; the dialect used by the actors, as in the case of the Saudi show, was not intelligible to me. Director Abdel-Aziz El-Muslim had the ambitious idea of doing without stage-sets and using lighting to sculpture the scene and was partially successful. His film shots, however, featuring the pearl divers at sea, were barely visible.

Technically, the United Arab Emirates' *Qabr El-Wali* (The Shrine or The Tomb of the Holy Man) was the exact opposite of the Kuwaiti entry. There were no lighting gimmicks and hardly any movement: the actors simply stood or squatted and gabbled on. The stage was covered in sand and abundantly dressed, on all sides, with reeds. Realism was pursued with a vengeance. When the two swindlers who eventually deceive the villagers into believing that the tomb of their donkey is a

holy shrine first appear, they walk in with a real, live donkey in tow. Someone suggested that it had been flown with the set all the way from the Gulf, but the poor thing looked gaunt and bedraggled, and I was sure it was Egyptian. When the official jury withheld the first best actor award, many thought it should have gone to the donkey.

The pursuit of realism was also evident in the Palestinian *Pot of Oil* — a deadly dull and melodramatic piece, recited (rather than performed) by ham actors, and designed to heap guilt on all expatriate Palestinians. I bore 20 minutes of it then fled. One good thing came out of it, however: it put me off the Libyan *Tales*, Morocco's *Sharks* and Qatar's *Mawwal*. I had already heard they were disasters but was determined to try them all the same. What finally deterred me was being told they were worse than "The Pot."

I looked forward to the Tunisian *Book of Women*, but it was a sad disappointment. Izz El-Din El-Medani's text is no more than a heated debate, in a court-room setting, between a young rebellious wife, spouting off feminist slogans, and her stick-in-the-mud mother-in-law who never transcends the familiar comic stereotype. The husband (another cliché), who keeps trying to barge in, is firmly kept out of the arena by the judge and his grotesque guard. The reason becomes apparent at the end when the judge, who has tacitly taken the side of the wife all along, declares as he withdraws that women are the cause of women's oppression. The solution, as the end reveals, lies in the young standing up to the old, and the example of the wife assures us of eventual victory. As for the venerable patricians, like the judge, guardians of religion and the law, we (women) can count on their support. In this way, by a kind of literary sleight of hand, El-Medani attempts to steer clear of the historical roots of the problem.

Director Hammad El-Mezzi used every possible directorial gimmick in his power to endow El-Medani's static, prosaic text with a sense of life and a degree of theatricality. He gave it an elaborate set (where the stage floor became a high slope with many trap doors and a throne at the top) with an elaborate lighting plan to match; he introduced masks, a life-size turbaned statue, a number of artificial legs, soft Jazz music, Orff's *Carmina Burana*, weird costumes (in the case of the guard), plus a bawdy movement or two. His efforts, however, commendable as they were, only served to underline the pompous dullness of the play and its shallow depths.

Roger Assaf's *Memoirs of Job*, a documentary play about Beirut, presented a year ago on the 50th anniversary of Lebanon's independence, fared better. Since Assaf wrote and directed it, the performance was in complete harmony with the text. The slides were effective and the four movable screens on which they were projected were also used, with a few other simple props, to shape the scene. The acting was uniformly good despite some melodramatic patches, and this unpretentious, uncluttered work won Assaf the award for best director.

Syria came with a rambling tale of war and famine of epic proportions. Mamdouh Udwan's *Safar Barlak* (a Turkish word which refers to the conscription of Syrians during the first World War), which ran for two uninterrupted hours, was originally written as a six-hour TV serial and the stage version bore the marks of this original design. The history of a village over ten years was traced through the individual stories of its men and women, those who went to the war and those who stayed behind. The panoramic view entailed an episodic structure with many false climaxes, and with the negative side of war as a central

theme, a degree of melodrama was unavoidable. The young cast, mostly students at the Syrian Theatre Institute, acted competently and Amal Saadedin's distinguished performance won her a second best actress award.

The Algerian dialect in *Roots* (Guzur) proved an insurmountable barrier to understanding. It was obvious, however, that the play was a modern reworking of the Don Quixote theme with a critical slant on what is happening in Algeria today. The Don Quixote-Sancho Panza duo were alternately serious and farcical and when they sang, they delightfully parodied the style of old Music Hall routines. My favourite scene, however, was the one which featured a trio of bearded men, in traditional Algerian get-up, walking backwards in unison, in the hope of eventually regressing in history to the golden times of their ancestors. In terms of courage and audacity, the Algerian *Roots* surpassed all the other entries and gave us fresh hopes for Algeria. But ideology apart, *Roots* fully deserved the best show award it got for its imaginative power, innovative technique and artistic compactness. Actor Nur El-Sherif, who headed the official jury, didn't have to quote the name of Algerian director Abdel Qadir Allula (who was gunned down by the Islamic Salvation Front on 12 March this year) to justify this verdict.

Curiously, the Jordanian entry, which proved highly popular with the public and the critics (they gave it their best direction award), was completely ignored by the official jury. This caused a rumpus on the last day when Hatem El-Sayed, the Jordanian member of the jury, protested in public against the results. Many took his side. The Jordanian *An Evening with Abi Layla El-Muhalhal* gave us a hilarious,

tongue-in-cheek, modern reading of an old and gruesome *Sira (El-Zir Salem)* in the style of a strip cartoon. Director Mohamed El-Dammour ransacked the Arab folk heritage and came back with a bag full of rituals, songs and dances, street shows and many forms of popular entertainment. He poured everything into his show with a zestful splash and seemed to take a positive delight in excess. In the intimate space of the Youth Chamber Theatre, the galloping tempo of the show was quite overpowering and the energy of the young actors threatened to burst through the walls.

Of the critics' awards, three went to Egyptians: Tawfik Abdel-Hamid won best actor for his performance in *Ascent to the Citadel*; El-Gretly's *Tides of Night* (playing on the fringe) won best scenography and stage technique; and Nadir Salah El-Din's *El-Shuttar wa El-'Ayareen* (Thieves and Tramps) won best group acting. The critics' best production, however, was Lebanon's *Memoirs of Job*, and their best actress award, like that of the official jury's, went to the Tunisian Fawziyah Badr.

Bubbles and Balloons

The Amman Theatre Festival*

The real drama in this festival, which lasted for a fortnight (from 27 March to 10 April) took place mostly off stage. On the morning of my arrival, I was visited by a ghost from the past. I had met Dr. Mohsen Musawi at the Baghdad theatre festival in 1978 when he was head of the then thriving and vast Iraqi state publishing organisation, and enjoyed health, wealth and power. In those days, despite his heavy responsibilities (he was also a writer, a translator, an academic scholar and university professor), he had an unbridled zest for life and boundless *joie de vivre*. But the man has suffered a sea-change. He is now a frail, grey, broken man whom diabetes has deprived of the few pleasures of life the collapse of his kingdom had left him — an exile, wandering in the Arab world from one teaching job to another and from one publisher to the next to market his books. He endures his fate with stoical resignation and a soft, pensive smile, but cannot stop worrying about the fate of his brother who is still in an Iraqi cell and suffering from cancer. In meeting me, I am sure, Dr Musawi was seeking to capture a glimpse of his golden, care-free days, of many dear absent faces, of those distant evenings by the Tigris when the glasses clinked happily and the strains of a distant lute wafted on the summer breeze. Talk of the ravages of time.

At the Royal Arts Centre the same evening, at the opening of the festival, the Iraqi drama continued to spin out. In the middle of the

* 27.4.1995.

second row was a delegation of Iraqi theatre artists and their aspect made a shocking impact on me. Veteran playwright and actor Yusef El-'Ani, whom I had known as a small, nimble man, quite nifty despite his years (three score and more), now looked totally subdued. The thick muffler round his neck made his white head look pathetically small, as if it had shrunk. Beside him, actress and playwright Awatif Na'im, in a simple, rough-textured black coat, looked sallow and emaciated. Her husband, Aziz Khayyoun, a director and actor of immense talent, and once a man of great vitality and vigour, looked pale and haggard. I had heard the night before, on my arrival, about the rigours of their trip from Baghdad to Amman — a 16-hour bumpy bus-ride in bitter cold (the route crosses a desert) with long waits on both sides of the frontier. But the journey, however arduous, could not reasonably explain why they looked so ailing.

Food. The word suddenly flashed before my eyes. These people had come from a country which lives in a state of near famine. I remembered all the sad stories I had heard at lunch from a Palestinian friend who had recently left Baghdad about the conditions there. With meat costing 1500 Iraqi dinars a kilo and onions 650, it has become a hard struggle indeed to keep body and soul together. (The average monthly income now is, optimistically, 2000 dinars – formerly about $6,000 and currently worth $2). Serious malnutrition is currently a hard fact in Iraq and children are the ones worst affected by it. Last Ramadan, the Iraqi regime decided, in a magnanimous gesture, to remind its subjects of the taste of poultry in honour of the holy month of fasting. Each family got two chickens free (for the whole month), and the Iraqi media made a propaganda meal of the occasion. For many, it was the only meat they had tasted, or are likely to taste, for many

months. Still, it is not only the physical health of the Iraqi nation which is being deeply damaged by the international economic sanctions, but also its mind. Currently, with so many intellectuals, artists, scientists and writers rushing out whenever they get the chance, the country is undergoing a serious brain drain. Awatif Na'im's glazed eyes and the sight of a handful of expatriate Iraqi theatre people, living in Jordan now (but who knows where they will be next year), were cruel reminders of the tragic state of affairs in that once thriving land.

I was pondering the cruel indifference of history to man when the ceremony began. Mohamed El-Abedi, the honorary head of the festival, gave a highly emotional, lyrical speech which hinted at the many obstacles encountered by the members of the Fawanis (Lanterns) Theatre Group in organising this non-governmental festival, at the resistance the idea had met with in many quarters, and at the many struggles that lie ahead. It all sounded familiar; it is the story of any free artistic enterprise in the Arab world. I remembered how our free theatre groups had struggled for the past five years to hold their annual free theatre festival, how disturbing the phenomenon had proved for all official theatrical organs, and how, after four festivals, the movement had run out of steam and fizzled out. This year, instead of holding their 5th festival, the once defiant young Egyptian artists are waiting meekly at the door of the Cultural Development Fund which has decided to sift through the different troupes and choose a few to subsidise and put under its direct supervision. I wonder if the lucky chosen ones will still retain the word 'free' in their names.

The non-governmental denomination of the Amman Festival was its major attraction for me. I wanted to compare the experience of the

Fawanis Group in launching their festival with that of our Free Theatre Movement and find out how they had navigated their way round the many lethal autocratic rock formations that infest the treacherous waters of cultural life in the Arab world. The secret, as I discovered from many sources, lay in a triple policy of :

a) Seeking out the most enlightened people in authority, gaining their support as patrons, in their individual capacity, and wheedling as much money as you possibly can out of them while publicly and quite vociferously acknowledging your debt.

b) Pacifying your enemies and opponents by dragging their names in as benefactors, even though they have done nothing but oppose you, which is tantamount to cornering them publicly into keeping quiet, or throwing them the proverbial bone.

c) Keeping all the ropes in your hand, financial, artistic, administrative, while cutting a low profile in the opening and closing ceremonies, leaving the limelight for the patrons, real or nominal. But whatever you do, do not surrender your independence.

This may sound thoroughly Machiavellian, but it has worked for Fawanis. When the Ministry of Culture denied them financial help (you would never guess that from the festival's pamphlet) they sought out the enlightened head of the Amman Municipality and walked out with 20,000 Jordanian dinars (the equivalent of $30,000) and a permission to hold all the festival's functions in the Royal Arts Centre.

The Royal Arts Centre holds two theatres, a large traditional one, highly equipped, and a small, intimate, semi-circular one. On the second floor, there is a huge conference hall which housed the festival's 3-day central seminar on scenography. The seminar was, predictably, a

flop; when tempers ran high over the different interpretations of the term, I discovered, perhaps for the hundredth time, that we, Arabs, cannot abide difference and are eternally committed to conformity. Besides, the sessions were held at 4.30 in the afternoon when most people would be either out or resting from their morning itineraries; no wonder they were so scantily attended.

Out of the 13 productions taking part in the festival (representing eight countries, including Jordan, which contributed five of them), eight were performed at the small theatre and only five at the big one — which is clearly indicative of the loosely experimental bent of the occasion. I only watched eight shows in all, since I couldn't stay more than ten days in Jordan, and the remaining five shows were crammed into the last three days of the festival. It was a light schedule (even including the 3-day seminar) which left me plenty of time for sightseeing. I climbed up to the ruins of the old Amman castle, at the top of one of the seven mountains that make up the city; there, the purity of the air and the beauty of the spot make you feel deliciously light-headed; I glided down to the ancient Roman amphitheatre where I spent hours declaiming my favourite Shakespearean speeches at the top of my voice and generally admiring the fantastic acoustics of the place (and possibly making an utter fool of myself into the bargain). I was shown a particular spot in the centre of the arena where, if you stand, your voice acquires a vastly magnified resonance, as if the stones are reverberating with it. It was presumably the spot where the leader of the chorus stood. Another astonishing acoustic features of the place is that if you stand at one end of the concave, semi-circular base of the tiered spectators' stone benches, put your check against the wall and whisper, a person with his car to the wall at the other end can hear you perfectly

— as if the stone is a conductor of sound. On another day I visited the old Roman city of Jerash and revelled in the architectural beauty of its magnificent amphitheatres and the gentle charm of its green slopes and wild flowers. Later, I spent two hours on the shore of the Dead Sea, thrilled and awed by the idea that I was on the lowest spot on the surface of the earth, and tasted the water; I nearly choked. Of all the sights, however, Petra, the ancient capital of the Nabataean Kingdom, proved the most wonderous, an unrivalled jewel. Carved in the sides of a cluster of dusty pink, old volcanic mountains, where wild plants and fig trees sprout mysteriously out of the rocks, it is truly a miracle of natural beauty and human creativity. Most of those trips were arranged by Nader Omran, the leader of the Fawanis Theatre Group and manager of the festival — a courtesy for which I, and the other guests who joined me, will remain eternally grateful.

For next year, Omran is already planning a street-theatre festival. He is determined to transform Amman from a commercial into a cultural and artistic centre and to subvert what he regards as its philistine, smugly complacent way of life, even for two weeks. "It will be a carnival in the streets," he mused dreamily.

But even inside the Royal Arts Centre, it felt like a carnival — the lights, the flowers, the hustle and bustle, and the balloons — so many balloons everywhere. Clusters of them framed the door of the Centre, the door of the main theatre, and streamed on either side of the proscenium arch of the big stage. In the opening performance, *Maria's Eyes and Sinbad*, written and directed by Omran, with sets, costumes and lighting by Ra'id Asfour, a single balloon hung in mid-air in the centre of the stage; it functioned as a visual metaphor for the setting of

the action – an imaginary autocratic state, imprisoned inside an air bubble which lies on the bed of the sea like the rotting wreckage of a drowned vessel. On a back screen the lighting drew images of waves, of a blood-red sun disc above, of streams of bubbles rising up to the surface, and reflected the shadow of Maria, who drowned herself to escape the corruption and oppression of the bubble-state, and turned into a mermaid floating in the free waters of the sea. In front of the screen (inside the bubble), the stage was populated with grotesque characters and transvestites, with thickly and clownishly painted faces, richly and bizarrely costumed in a fantastic medley of styles that evoked many theatrical traditions. They looked like travesties of humanity and moved like marionettes. The action, which consisted mainly in revealing the different aspects of rottenness inside the bubble, proceeded in the manner of a Christmas pantomime with lots of buffoonery, slapstick and knock-about farce. The only real person in this phantasmagorical world is Maria's old lover, a fisherman called Abu El-Nur (source of light) whom the play develops into an obvious symbol of the legendary Fisher-King.

Omran's one balloon proliferated into 10,000 balloons in Khalid El-Turifi's *You Are Not You*, based on Aziz Niseen's text. Indeed, walking into the small theatre that evening felt like wading through a sea of coloured balloons. They literally covered the whole stage and most of the auditorium. The audience had a whale of a time bursting them before, during and after the show; and since the play was about false heroes and myth-making, and a clear invitation to burst all the empty myths and heroic bubbles promulgated by military regimes, the incessant din of pops and bangs provided a fitting and most effective sound accompaniment to the show.

The third Jordanian production was of Albert Camus' *The Misunderstanding*, performed by the students of the theatre department at Yarmouk university, and disappointingly directed by the Iraqi Awani Karroumi who currently works there. Karroumi used to be an inspired director when he lived in Iraq. In Jordan, he seems to have lost his touch and also his authenticity. The puzzling feast of sound and lighting gimmickry which encased the limp and bloodless performance by way of a prelude and a finale struck one as a sad and embarrassing attempt to cover up the loss. The Iraqi *Um Al-Khoush*, on the other hand, a monodrama based on a character in Abdel-Rahman Mounif's novel *Mudun Al-Milh* (Cities of Salt), seemed to touch a real chord: the agonised, delirious waiting of the old mother for the return of her son, who was snatched away from her by the forces of the Emir (prince) to work for the foreign, oil-prospecting companies, and her eventual drowning in an oil-barrel built up a forceful theatrical metaphor which genuinely expressed the tragic state of feeling experienced by most Iraqis nowadays and their attitude to the West, on the one hand, and to their own regime, on the other.

Of the four foreign (non-Arab) participating shows, I managed to catch three, missing only the Russians. The Spanish *How to Walk*, by a young, travelling theatre group (formed in 1991) which consists of four actors, including one from Italy and another from Portugal, was a mime show, hilariously funny and vaguely philosophical. The attempts of the four actors, clad in white with black bird-masks, to explore an empty square-shaped area builds up a light-hearted, metaphor for man (or woman's) journey in life. It proved quite popular with the audience and attracted hordes of children on the second night. It seems

everybody, young and old, likes clowns and the old routines of the *commedia dell'arte.*

The two Ukranian shows (*Save Me And Keep Me*, by the Youth Theatre Group of Sevastapol, and *Script Votillo*, by the Suzirja Theatre) used a lot of language; but it proved no barrier. There was enough pure theatre language in both to carry their meanings across. In the former, based on a script by the Russian novelist and poet Ivan Bounin and using many of his poems, the lighting played the major part in recreating the sense of loneliness and alienation experienced by the Russian intellectuals who fled to France after the Bolsheviks took power in Moscow. In the latter, the struggles of a Jesus-like figure, naked and with long streaming hair, to break free of the man-size box which encases him constituted a metaphor for the thirst of the soul to break free of the prison of the flesh. Here, again, the lighting and the background music were prominent and essential structural components.

From Egypt, the festival, i.e. the Fawanis Group, invited only one company, the only still truly free one, Al-Warsha, and their *Tides of Night* captured the imagination of many. The official invitation, when it arrived from Jordan, was opposed, and predictably so, by some members of the theatre committee of the official Supreme Council for Culture. Fortunately, they were over-ruled and sanity prevailed. At the end of the festival, a 'pact of fraternity' between Fawanis and Al-Warsha was announced. And in view of the current conditions in the Arab world, this form of Arab unity is, perhaps, the only one that might possibly work. A pity no free Iraqi group could announce a similar pact with Al-Warsha; but then, perhaps more than meat, freedom, at present, is a rare commodity in Iraq.

Rites of Spring

Osiris: An Arab opera a Al-Hanager*

About the only place in Cairo where you can get real theatrical excitement nowadays is Al-Hanager Centre. Its record this year has been quite impressive so far. Karam Mataweh's *Book of Kine* may not have been quite to my taste, being too declamatory and simplastic, and Jawad El-Asadi's Chekovian version of *Les Bonnes* may have been a little too timid and tame, but Gamil Rateb's austere and elegant *Sheherezade* and Mohamed Abul Su'ood's exhilaratingly daring *Cave Dwellers* have more than put the record to rights. The unflinching policy of the centre, and its guiding philosophy, set out by its diligent directress, the indomitable Hoda Wasfi, is never to reject new ideas and experiments, however wild they may seem, so long as they are serious and deeply thought out. In the absence of such a policy, it would have been impossible for the Lebanese violinist and composer Nida' Abu Murad to stage his adventurous attempt (unwisely ambitious in the opinion of some) to create an Arab operatic work out of the traditional musical modes of what is generally known as classical Islamic music.

Islamic music, the experts would tell us, is essentially vocal, characterised by a highly subtle organisation of melody and rhythm, augmented by virtuoso improvisation and melodic ornament. Musical forms are closely tied to poetry and often alternate vocal solos with instrumental interludes. Melodies are organised in terms of *maqamat* (plural of *maqama*), or "modes" — characteristic melodic patterns with

* 29.6.1995. In Arabic.

prescribed scales, preferential notes, typical melodic and rhythmic formulas, variety of intonation and other conventional devices. The performer improvises within the framework of the *maqam* which is also imbued with ethos (Arabic *ta'thir*), that is to say, a specific emotional or philosophical meaning attached to a musical mode. Rhythms are organised into rhythmic modes or *iqa'at'* (plural of *iqa'*) — cyclical patterns of strong and weak beats.

Rarely heard nowadays in its pure form, the *maqamat* music is likely to sound to the untrained ears of the modern Egyptians dull and repetitive. Indeed, that was the general complaint in the press conference held at the centre after a preview of the work for the benefit of the critics and reviewers. At the mention of "dull repetitiveness", the composer went into a huff, acted incredulous and moaned in French "c'est drôle", rolling up his eyes. He had obviously credited the Egyptians with more respect for their traditions and more sensitivity to the "highly subtle organisation of melody and rhythm" characteristic of this music. Irritating and provocative as Abu Murad's response to the voiced comments was, one could nevertheless sympathise with his frustration. It reminded me of the reception of the Japanese Kabuki theatre in Cairo at the opening of the Opera House and the explosion of jokes and satirical cartoons it occasioned. It also reminded me of my daughter's first exposure to a Chiense opera and how she nearly fell off her chair with laughter at the sound of Jason's falsetto voice (the opera was based on the story of Medea). It took her quite a number of similar works to cultivate a taste for this highly specific form of art.

To create for the Arabs their own operatic form, based on their traditional musical modes, their legends and musical instruments, is

surely a legitimate and worthy ambition. To achieve this ambition, even the most carping critic would admit, Abu Murad has pursued a long and arduous route. Initially trained in medicine, Abu Murad eventually forsook the healing of bodies to the healing of souls. He embarked on a musical career as a violinist and immersed himself in the western classical tradition. One fine morning, however, he stumbled upon the *maqamat* musical form and was, as he admits, fascinated with its spirituality, melodic power and its potential for free improvisation. With a deeply ingrained mystical streak and a classical musical bent, Abu Murad embarked on a course of musical experiments, starting with *The Daughter of Jerusalem*, and progressing to *Adon* (or Adonis), then to the currently controversial *Osiris*.

To appreciate *Osiris*, and slip into its ritualistic mood and its religious (in the widest sense of the word) mental frame, you have first of all to humbly surrender yourself to it, having relinquished at the door of the theatre all your pre-conceived critical and musical notions and your firmly established expectations. For the lucky few who were able to perform this task of humility and willing self-abnegation, *Osiris* proved a deeply moving and highly inspiring experience. The cult of Osiris merged into the cult of Adonis, and Isis and Astarte united into a symbol of the fertility goddess worshipped by the ancient Egyptians, the Phoenicians, the Hebrews (under the name of Ashtorth), and by the Babylonians and Assyrians in the figure of Ishtar.

This drama of agonised, sacred quests, of death and rebirth, and of the eternal conflict between innocence and experience, good and evil, was presented by director Hana' Abdel-Fattah in the form of a Mystery play with masks, symbolic decor and stylised movement. At times, the

white back-drop acted as a screen on which scenes of Isis's trip to the kingdom of Astarte and Horus's trip to the underworld were silhouetted. As in Chinese opera, the musicians with their traditional instruments (in this case, the lute, the *qanun* and the tambourine, plus the violin adroitly played by Abu Murad while impersonating Anobis (the god of mummification and graveyards), were in full view all the time. In full view too, the actors/singers donned their masks, white mantles and Pharaonic trinkets. A barren tree with leafless, outstretched branches, as if in desperate supplication, carried all the actors' accessories and acted as a silent, ironical, visual comment on all the ongoing fertility rites.

It needed quite a leap of imagination to reconcile the pagan cults of Isis, Astarte, Osiris and the rest of the summoned deities, with the old, traditional Islamic musical modes. There were moments when the passion of the singers and their vocal versatility carried us to unsuspected emotional heights. At other times, however, and quite sadly, we were mercilessly hurled into the lower depths of the worst type of amateurish rawness. The five singers, though vocally competent, obviously lacked theatrical training. There were times when one had to close ones eyes to avoid the painfully embarrassing gawkiness of the wooden movements. Still, the experience had its fascination — the fascination of being sucked into a pagan, cyclical vortex of myths then surfacing and gyrating upwards in a spiritual spiral leading to a state of total mystical peace and acceptance.

In the Balance

Journées Théatrelas de Carthage*

During my eight-day stay in Tunis I tried very hard to shake off the oppressive feeing that this once prestigious festival was at its last gasp. Symptoms of debility and premature senility could be detected everywhere. In fact, my experience of the Carthage Festival has led me to question the viability — and credibility — of all Arab state-run theatre festivals. Is it just me, or something in the air, or the present transitional stage we are going through in the Arab world between the values and modes of thought and norms of the sixties and those of the nineties and the new world order? It seems that we keep moving in the same circles, seeing the same faces, discussing the same issues, eternally rehashing the "theatre crisis", and even, more or less, seeing the same shows. No new blood is being pumped into these festivals; we seem to have established a time warp in which all the old veterans are comfortably ensconced, immune to the winds of change. As I looked around me, at all the old, beloved, familiar faces — at us, the old sixties' brood of writers, critics and reviewers — I could not help a vague and pervasive sense of guilt, as if I had usurped the place of another without meaning to. I found myself wondering if theatre was really uppermost in the minds of the organisers of all Arab theatre festivals and whether it was imperative that one should be at least 50 before one was allowed to participate in these festivals. With all their contests and prizes, Arab theatre encounters have turned into something like football tournaments or wrestling matches. Chauvinism runs high

* 9.11.1995.

on these occasions and even the mildest and most rational and tolerant of human beings involuntarily becomes a bellicose jingoist.

Over the years, the Tunisians have, predictably and perhaps quite rightly, established a tradition of winning the best show award for Tunisia. Sometimes, also, the best director award. But to be absolutely honest, they have always striven hard to deserve it. They have some of the best directors and actors in the Arab world, and if the international jury panel tell you that Raja Ben Ammar's *Baiya' Al-Hawa* (Love Peddler), an exquisitely executed mime and modern dance parody on the theme of the fallen women in melodramatic films, Western and Eastern, you cannot possibly fault them. But when they suddenly trump up an imaginary award for "best dramatic text in classical Arabic" for the benefit of the Egyptian *Book of Kine*, you begin to have doubts since you know full well that there is no question of "best" there; it was the only text in classical Arabic. I do not for a minute doubt the integrity of all the members of the international jury; the fault lies with the politically riddled situation they find themselves in and with the official status of the festival. Whether in Cairo or in Tunis, any international jury will inevitably come under political pressure. On this occasion, their job was made easier by the almost total absence of all African countries, with the exceptioon of Senegal, and all the Arab Gulf states, save Saudi Arabia; and since the competition is limited to the Arabs and Africans alone, most of the participants managed to get a slice of the cake. Apart from the best production award, Tunisia also managed to scoop the award for best scenography with Mohamed Idris' *Rajel Wa Mara* (A Man and A Woman) — a charming and colourful comic piece based on three Japanese medieval farces of the *Kyogen* type and performed in the style characteristic of this old genre. Syria walked

away with the best direction award for a revival of an eight year old production of *Caligula* by Jihad Sa'di, and the Iraqi *One Hundred Years of Loving* — an intense drama about a war prisoner who comes home after ten years to find his wife married to another — carried off the awards for best text and actress. Ahmed Abu Salaoum's performance in George Ibrahim's adaptation of Athol Fugard's *Sizwi Bansi Is Dead*, presented by Al-Kasaba Theatre of Jerusalem under the title *Ramzi Abul-Majd*, won him the best actor award. Jordan, somewhat undeservedly, got nothing, despite an impressive production of Jean Genet's *Les Bonnes*.

Unlike former years, Asia and Latin America were not represented this year, and of the Western shows there were a blessed few. Of these, two (the Italian *Romeo and Juliet*, done in the style of the Comedia dell'arte, and the French *Berenice*) I had already seen in Cairo, and two — Britain's *Three Musketeers* and the American *Abel and Cain* — I had to miss since they were scheduled on the last day of the festival.

I was lucky, though, to catch the Belgian *Boxe* by the Compagnie de la Casquette. Featuring two actors in boxing costume, complete with gloves, cooped up in a cell, it alternated scenes of actual boxing with mime, acrobatics, and long bouts of storytelling. These all combined to form a metaphor for man's fight for freedom and creativity. The stories take us to China, Japan, Africa and far-off places, while the storytellers remain trapped in the cell; they are engaged in their game of telling stories and acting them out in order to while away the time and preserve their sanity. The set simply consisted of a backdrop featuring a high-up, round window and two rough beds; these were stood up on end, once the game started, to form a kind of screen from behind which the actors

would emerge to play their various narrated parts. A blind accordion player accompanied them, sitting on one side of the stage. Her arrival signaled the beginning of the game and her departure its end.

Considering the humble number of new visiting shows (Lebanon's *Medea* and *The Caretaker* were repeats from CIFET), and barring the impressive Tunisian contingent, it was odd, to say the least, that the official invitation extended to the Egyptian Al-Warsha Troupe to perform their *Tides of Night* outside the contest (*Book of Kine* being the official Egyptian entry) was suddenly and inexplicably cancelled on the flimsy pretext that they could not find a slot for it in the festival's programme — even though the Egyptian Cultural Development Fund had willingly offered to pay for their passage. Their absence disappointed many and raised the suspicions of some. More than once, as an Egyptian, I was asked why *Tides of Night* had not shown up, and despite my diligent efforts to discover a plausible reason for their "disinvitation" (the head of the festival, playwright Ezzeddin Medani, having declared a state of siege and barricaded himself in his office for the duration of the festival), a reason has yet to come to light.

The exclusion of a free theatre troupe which has managed to build up quite a respectable international reputation over the past few years, and which made a very favourable impression at the 1991 Carthage festival with its *Dayer Dayer* — though this incident in itself may be quite innocent — nevertheless went a long way to corroborate the suspicion that had been slowly forming in my mind: that state-run festivals are politically deep waters where only the big fish (read "official" fish) can swim. I was reminded of my experience as a member of last year's Supreme Culture Council Theatre Committee,

which is charged with selecting shows to represent Egypt in theatre festivals abroad. Partisanship and favouritism are rampant; at times it seems like an exclusive club from which non-members are automatically excluded. On one occasion, a non-governmental Arab theatre festival sent an invitation requesting the presence of a specific free theatre troupe. Not to put too fine a point on it, it caused an uproar.

This problem is not confined to Egypt: all Arab countries, unfortunately, suffer to some extent from the bane of officialdom. The prevalence of this establishment oriented attitude, predictably, seems to have alienated young theatre people. The symposium at Carthage provided ample evidence of this: despite the topical subject, women and theatre, there was a noticeable scarcity of young women in the audience. Even the Tunisian actresses who were supposed to take part were conspicuous by their absence. Naturally, as a result, the four scheduled sessions dwindled to three.

On stage, however, the Tunisian actresses made their presence strongly felt. Fadil Ja'aybi's *The Lovers of the Deserted Café*, which graced the opening ceremony, showcased the talents of some of Tunisia's finest actresses. Jalila Bakkar, Zahira Ben Ammar, and Fatma Ben Saidan made a riveting impact. For three hours, without an interval, and in my case without even understanding the impenetrable Tunisian dialect, we were captivated by their tempestuous passion and technical brilliance. The play, which I vaguely gathered was about fundamentalism, the threats of unemployment, the alienation of the young and the generation gap, and included incidents of rape, violent fights and confrontations, was a veritable *tour de force* that kept us mesmerised and glued to our seats.

This saved the day for many, since the first part of the evening's entertainment featured the charms of the charismatic belly-dancer Laila Hadad. Curiously enough, she made little impact on the staid and straight-laced theatre community, many of whom were shocked and infuriated and left their seats within five minutes of her appearance. It may have been a "scandal" as somebody put it, but I for one believe that if people whose business is the theatre can be so afraid of the human body, and so disdainful of a popular art form, then we still have a very long way to go — even further than Carthage.

A Time for Community

Roger Assaf's *Tales of 1882* at Al-Hanager*

It is not always wise to balk at a second viewing of a spectacle that one found disappointing the first time. When I watched Roger Assaf's *Tales of 1882* four weeks ago (it then bore the unattractive title *Kan wa Yakuun* — in English, Then and Now), it struck me as a rambling, fractionally sentimental and fuzzy-edged production, lack-lustre and painfully over long.

The script — collectively written by Assaf and the actors, with outside help from poet and playwright Mahmoud Neseem, and largely based on Abul Ma'ati Abul Naga's novel *Return to Exile*, the memoirs of Ahmed Orabi and the poetry of Fu'ad Haddad — seemed untidy, overblown and woodenly phrased. It had been put together in the course of a workshop organised by Al-Hanager that lasted for several weeks, and when it arrived on stage, the joins where the various pieces had been hammered together were still quite obvious. The plethora of quick scenes, or 'shots', intended to document the turbulent events of 1882 — the army's rebellion, led by Orabi, against the corrupt court of Khedive Tawfiq, which directly led, within months, to the British military occupation of Egypt — and recreate the feel of daily life in their shadow seemed badly in need of focus.

The possibility of a focus was tentatively projected in the historical figure Abdalla Al-Nadeem. Indeed, his supportive role in Orabi's rebellion, and the story of his transformation from a humble telegraph-

* 24.10.1996. In Arabic.

operator and ambitious poetaster, currying favour with the rich and powerful, into a serious poet, playwright, actor, opposition journalist, passionate patriot, advocator of the enlightenment and active revolutionary intellectual, as well as his mysterious disappearance for nine whole years in the Nile Delta, fitfully provided some sort of a narrative line; however, it was too flimsy to sustain the constant onslaught of so many disparate scenes and episodes. At times, the performance degenerated into a jumble of random scenes, at once confused and confusing. Particularly disturbing on this occasion was the feeling that Assaf's ideology (which champions the group above the individual), his well-tried method of collective research and composition, and his technical policy (stunningly successful in previous works) of splitting a character among many actors, making the actors double and treble, and mixing narration, impersonation and direct address to the audience in a calculated effort to create the impression of a spontaneous communal event or game, seemed, in this case, to exacerbate the sense of fragmentation, incoherence and pointlessness.

One wondered why one was subjected to this recital of past events. It did not seem to offer a fresh point of view, a new perspective, or even tell us something we did not already know. To remind an audience of their past may be a worthy object, but one could as easily do it in an article or a documentary film. One expects more of theatre, particularly Assaf's brand of theatre. Occasionally, attempts were made to link the past with the present and project Orabi's defeat in 1882 through the lens of Nasser's defeat in 1967, but they were forced and laboured and led nowhere. The general reaction to the *Tales* in its first week of life on stage was that it had a lot of potential but was in need of drastic cutting and pruning, streamlining and focusing. And better lighting, I might

add. When I first saw the show I could hardly discern what was going on on stage and thought that for some reason Al-Hanager had decided to save on electricity.

A lot happened to the *Tales* in the four weeks intervening between my first and second viewing. For one thing, it shed a whole hour and you cannot imagine the difference this made. It felt as if I was watching a different show: things clicked together, there was rhythm, mood and tempo, and the framework, previously submerged under masses of material, emerged with clear-cut lucidity. Unburdened of so many pointless scenes that dissipated energies and distracted the viewer, the actors, finally, got into their stride, and their performances gained in energy, concentration, and dynamic range. Whereas previously they had shuffled and shambled or pranced and scampered about the stage, their movement now had a purposeful clarity and was strong and elegant. They slipped into and out of their various roles with speed, grace, ease and conviction, but underneath the deceptive air of spontaneity and casualness, and despite the spirit of camaraderie and many flashes of humour, they communicated an urgent sense of intense involvement in a process of rediscovering the past and redefining their relationship with history and the present on more personal and less ideological terms. It is thanks to their performance and to Assaf's well-judged extensive cuts that the mutlifocal structure of the work and its artistic nature as borderline theatre became apparent. Lying at the points of intersection between life and art, between historical documentation and popular entertainment, the *Tales*, like Assaf's previous *Tales of '36* or *Days of the Tents*, is a prime example of community theatre at its best. As such, it resists any final closure and continues to invite its community of performers and ordinary people to

further deliberations about the past and redefinition of their relationship with it. Maybe that is why Assaf conceived the *Tales* as the first part of a trilogy that will go on to examine the massive popular uprising of 1919, and then the 1952 Revolution — or coup d'état — that brought Nasser to power.

A Light Shines Over the Gulf

The 8th Sharjah Theatre Festival and the choice of the city as Cultural Capital of the Arab world for 1998*

It was a very strange feeling finding myself the only woman among 50 or more men at the sumptuous feast given by the ruler of Sharjah, H H Sheikh/Dr. Sultan Bin Mohamed Al-Qasimi, in honour of the guests of the country's eighth theatre festival. I was informed that my presence in such an awesome gathering of dignitaries and VIPs was an exceptional courtesy, almost without precedent. My vanity was not tickled. A sprinkling of the lovely actresses and female writers and artists I had met the evening before at the opening of the festival would have added a touch of warmth, colour and variety to the occasion and removed my awkward self-consciousness. Still, the elegant Islamic architecture of the building, the headquarters of the ruler, and the beauty of the domed spacious hall we were ushered into — not to mention the delicious iced carrot juice passed around and the presence of many old friends and familiar faces (albeit all male) — were a great source of comfort.

When Dr Al-Qasimi walked in and went around shaking hands with everybody (an enormous lot of hand-shaking) I was struck by his gentle, unassuming modesty, his cordiality and sophisticated sense of humour. He had something to say to everybody, and though garbed in the traditional dress of all the Gulf sheikhs, he had the ease and

* 14.5.1998.

composure of a citizen of the world. He had the kind of urbanity born out of long and intense exposure to and assimilation of cross-cultural influences and an enlightened understanding of the best in his own national culture. Years of knocking around Cairo's cultural and political hubs as a student of horticulture at Cairo University, and hobnobbing with talented comrades, including actors Adel Imam and Salah El-Sa'dani, followed by years at the University of Exeter reading for a Ph.D. in history among the enchanting fishing villages of Devon, and years of apprenticeship in politics have combined to produce a progressive and enlightened ruler intent on leading Sharjah into the 21st century, despite the extremely conservative nature of society in the Gulf. Not only has he chosen to marry a Ph.D. in her own right and encourages his daughters to study ballet, classical music and painting, but he also invests intensely in the cultural infrastructure of his country, in environmental conversation and development, education, archaeological excavations, the preservation of wildlife, historical sites and buildings, the arts and the empowerment of women. No wonder his beloved city has been chosen cultural capital of the Arab world for 1998.

A group of quaint ancient houses, built of sea rock and coral in the old Arab style, with the various living quarters ranged at ground level round open courtyards, were restored at his personal initiative and expense and transformed into museums and cultural centres for music and literature. However hot and humid it may be outside, the cosy little café in Sahat Al-Adab (the literary court) — with its shady arcades, wooden benches, white-washed walls and the aroma of Arabian coffee and minted tea — feels cool, breezy and informally hospitable. The tops of graceful palm trees fringe the walls on the outside and correspond

with the greenery in the corners of the courtyard, while the distant swish and faint humming of the waves conjure a lulling vision of the wharves and forests of masts across the road and the many white sandy beaches, dotted with palm trees and bordered with expanses of luscious grass.

In a room in this enchanting spot I watched a beautiful actress from Dubai (the festival hosts productions from all the seven states that make up the United Arab Emirates) giving a moving performance in a two-hander by Murray Schisgal called *The Typists*. But was it just her performance or partly the spell of the place that won her the award of Best Actress jointly with others? A pity that not more of the festival's productions took advantage of the beauty of this site, or of the adjoining, and equally charming, House of Music. *The Typists* was an exception; all the other productions opted for traditional spaces with picture-frame stages; and so, for ten days, we were constantly shuttled between the Africa Hall, which housed the small matinée performances, and the main Sharjah Cultural Centre, a recent and quite imposing Islamic building, which hosted the big productions.

I kept longing for the old-world charm of Sahat Al-Adab, but my schedule as head of the festival's jury (another unprecedented thing in the history of this bi-annual theatrical event and, hopefully, another breakthrough for the Gulf women), and as one of the main speakers in the seminar on the avant-garde movement in Arab theatre, left me little leisure. I did not make it to Sahat Al-Adab another time, but the location chosen for the sessions of the seminar was more than enough compensation. It was another graceful, two storey, historical building, of stunning beauty, spotted, renovated, and created into Al-Sharjah's

Art Museum by Dr. Al-Qasimi who donated to it his private art collection of priceless paintings as a gift to his people. It was a fascinating, thrillingly sensuous experience crossing the long marbled corridor that stretches from one end of the building to the other on the second floor, with the changing sky peeping at you and pouring its light through the lattice windows on both sides and the delicate webbed roof. Bordering the corridor on either side were the open exhibition rooms with treasures of beauty.

Officially, Dr Al-Qasimi is a statesman — a ruler of long experience. Unofficially, he is an arts connoisseur, a passionate historian (he is already working on a second PhD on the history of trade in the Gulf at Durham University), novelist and playwright. Unlike Vaclav Havel who climbed to political power on the steps of drama, Al-Qasimi chose to embrace fiction and drama at the apex of his political career and to join the motley ranks of the thespian tribe and jump onto their colourful and vicacious bandwagon.

The festival opened with his first dramatic oeuvre, a historical play of epic proportions and a cast of fifty (all male) about the sack of Baghdad in 1258, the slaughter of the Abassid Caliph Al-Must'sim, the decimation of its population, nearly 800,000 at the hands of the Mongol conqueror Hulegu, the grandson of the fearful Genghis Khan. In his foreword to the play, printed in the programme, Al-Qasimi makes no bones about the clear didactic purpose and message of his first venture into the realm of drama. He entered drama through the gates of history, he admits; *The Return of Hulegu* is intended as a lesson and a warning to the Arabs. It is all fact: no fictional embellishments or concessions to the requirements of traditional drama, such as psychological depth in

characterisation. "Reading the history of the Arab nation," he simply admits, "I have found that the events that preceded the fall of the Abbasid Dynasty are very similar to what is taking place now in the Arab world — as if history is repeaing itself. Hence this play: a reading of a painful present from a historical perspective. All the names, characters, places and events in this play are factual; and every word and sentence is intended to reflect, with absolute clarity, what is happening to our nation right now."

You may not like this kind of direct, documentary, didactic handling of history. But no one who saw it at the opening, in Qasim Mohamed's stirring, fast-moving production, could deny its forceful impact, ruthless austerity, and over-powering sense of urgency. It had a grim tragic frugality, with no frills or softening effects — like a fierce avalanche of grotesquely absurd choices and brutal massacres that left no room for reflection and held no ray of hope for humanity — Arab or otherwise. It was not, frankly, the kind of play I would choose to see more than once. It is all very well to document in drama the ruthless march of history and the rise and fall of nations; but the arbitrary ousting of women, their forced absence and exile from the historical pageant, made the artistic vision presented on stage somewhat lacking — less real and authentic and, personally, left an acid taste in my feminist mouth. History is not made up of just men warring, conquering, and massacring each other, and killing children and women and raping them in the process. It is essentially made of women guarding the fort of life against the ravages of demented, power-crazy males and dictators.

When Dr Al-Qasimi dismissed the eager media men with their incessantly flashing cameras and obtrusive microphones and led his guests into a beautiful conference room on the second floor to have an informal, friendly tête-à-tête with them before lunch, I thought I would get the chance to talk to him about his play, his projects, and the future of the festival. But, predictably, the males (I was a dismally sad minority) monopolised the conversation. It was hugely entertaining all the same. Samir Sarhan, the head of the Egyptian State Publishing House and a playwright, and the Kuwaiti director Fuad El-Shatti set about interviewing both the author and the Iraqi director of *The Return of Hulegu* about the nature of their collaboration over the play. Soon enough, the discussion slithered into the difficult and irritatingly irresolvable question of who takes priority: the writer or the director. Al-Qasimi diplomatically declared that the performer always comes first. A lot of what was said afterwards was platitudinous and commonplace; but what was really touching and refreshing was Al-Qasimi's attitude and genial eagerness. He was just like any other new playwright anxious to talk about his play and listen to what the 'big critical guns' have to say about it. The ruler had melted into the background or tacitly been left downstairs. The man sitting with us was simply a dramatist, and a faltering novice at that, in need of reassurance.

At the dinner table, his avid appetite for intelligfent convesastion did not abate. It was as vigorous as ever and its chosen target this time was Fawzi Fahmi, the head of the Egyptian Academy of Arts. The result was that for Fahmi it was all talk and no food. The waiters kept removing one full, untouched dish after another (there were about ten courses) until, finally, to my immense relief, I saw him dipping into a

small bowl of 'Umm Ali'. Funny that Fahmi should have travelled all the way from Egypt to feast solely on this typically Egyptian sweet dish at the prince's banquet! By 10 o'clock, when the evening performance ended, he was ravenous; but deciding what to eat took him over an hour. Sharjah is a gourmet's paradise with an infinite variety of international cuisine. By the time he made up his mind, choosing to go Persian, it was already too late; he had to settle for room service.

Choosing the winners of the festival's 12 awards was a much easier task: the competing productions numbered 13, representing 12 companies from the various states of the United Arab Emirates. By far the most moving and impressive was *Distress*, a one-woman show written and performed by a brilliant young actress called Sabreen Al-Rumeithi. It featured a lonely woman of forty reviewing her life, wrecked by patriarchal authority, and venomously railing against all forms of female coercion. Equally powerful was *The Water Flask* which focused on the inhuman treatment of divorced women in Gulf societies and the corrosive stigma that attaches to them however highly educated and intelligent they may be. The oppression of women, their longing for freedom and self-fulfillment, and their enforced, debilitating dependence on men and marriage for survival were also at the heart of *The Net*, *The Long Journey*, *The Typists*, and *The Cry of Metha*. The Gulf males too had a lot to say and joined the women in the ferocious critical thrust which made this festival more than a simple artistic event. The political, cultural and socio-economic fabric of the Arab world and its conservative societies was honestly scrutinised and ruthlessly anatomised in such plays as *No* and *The Other Face of the Clown* which, with *Distress*, shared the award for best production.

Of the festival's 12 awards, six went to women, plus two credits. I had not thought when I boarded the plane at Cairo airport on my first trip to the Gulf that I would be meeting so many brave and wonderful creative women or so many progressive and enlightened men. I left Sharjah hoping that next time I see it our friendship will have grown deeper, the projected theatre institute will have opened, the women will have shed many of their grievances and found scope to realise their enormous creative potential. I also hope that at the next reception at the ruler's headquarters the list of guests would include more than one representative of the female species. Funny that Dr Al-Qasimi and I overlapped at the University of Exeter without ever physically crossing paths.

In Search of Immortality
Gilgamesh at Al-Ghad Hall*

At Al-Ghad experimental theatre, director Ahmed Zaki and veteran actor Mahmoud El-Heddini lead their audience nightly on a journey back in time, to the 3rd millennium BC, in pursuit of the adventures, trials and legendary exploits of Gilgamesh and Enkidu, the best known of the ancient Mesopotamian heroes. The Akkadian epic which relates their story has been available in Arabic since 1950 when Taha Baqir and Bashir Francis published a translation in the Iraqi *Sumer* periodical. Other translations followed, including a new and more accurate one by Baqir which ran into three editions. But despite its wide popularity among the literati, and the appealing universality and enduring relevance of its central themes, particularly the revolt against death and the futile quest for immortality, the legend of Gilgamesh did not inspire any literary works until the 1980s. In his book, *The Specificity of Arabic Theatre* (published by the Arab Writers' Union in 1986), Khalid El-Baradi describes a verse dramatisation of the epic by Iraqi writer Walid Fadil which faithfully follows its narrative sequence, omits none of its events, does not interfere with its basic structure or provide new insights. In view of this, the introduction by the author of modern terms like inflation, monopoly, technology, the fifth column, or nuclear mass destruction is condemned by El-Baradi as a forced and mechanical attempt to give the play topical relevance.

I do not know if Fadil's Gilgamesh was ever produced in Iraq or anywhere else. The text itself is impossible to locate. But in 1989, an Egyptian-German collaborative production based on the epic, and

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* 22.4.1999. In Arabic.

bearing its name, was presented first at Sayed Darwish Hall, then, in 1990, at the Opera House. The work team consisted of composer Intisar Abdel-Fattah, poet Ahmed Suweilam and a German choreographer invited by the Goethe Institute. There was no attempt to represent or enact the events of the story; rather, its themes and images were distilled and projected in stirring and evocative sound and movement formations. In comparison, the current version of the epic, adapted by Shawqi Khamis, openly adopts the Brechtian epic theatre model with its pronounced political orientation. The conflict between Gilgamesh and Ishtar is foregrounded, expanded, and used with other events in the story to relay a message that strongly warns Third World countries (like Gilgamesh's Uruk) against the dangers of globalisation embodied by the seductive Ishtar, her rapacious, destructive bull and sly, thieving helpers.

Artistically, however, and apart from the performances of El-Heddini as Gilgamesh, Mu'taz El-Swifi as Enkindu and Anne El-Turki as Ishtar, the most interesting aspect of this Gilgâmesh is the restructuring of the rectangular Al-Ghad hall to create a wooden balcony encircling and overlooking the main performance space. Two sides of it serve as extra seating areas for the audience (providing a much better view of the action than the ground-level) while the other two represent, in turn: the divine seat of Ishtar, the goddess of love and fertility; the womb out of which the Bull of Heaven is created by the god Anu for Ishtar to punish Gilgamesh who spurns her marriage proposal; the abode of Humbaba, the monstrous guardian of the cedar forest; the island behind the waters of death, inhabited by Utnapishtim who survived the great flood; and the Mashu mountain which Gilgamesh has to cross to find out from Utnapishtim the secret of immortality and, with it, his salvation.

Notes From Jordan

The Amman Festival for Independent Theatre*

In the Arab world where, in varying degrees, repressive authoritarianism penetrates all aspects of life, informing structures of thought, social relations and government, cultural events — festivals in particular — have an air of crude political machination.

The partisan political base of such events, however well camouflaged, is hardly a secret. Over the years Arab artists and cultural activists have had to learn how to manipulate it in their interests without compromising their visions. By taking the establishment at its word, pretending to believe its slogans, and threatening to embarrass it by calling its bluff, artists have been able, in some cases, to secure subsidies, spaces, media coverage and a bigger margin of freedom.

Foreign participants from former colonial powers face a different challenge. Burdened with a heritage for which they feel they have to apologise, they suspend all judgment and exercise the virtue of tolerance and respect for difference to a fault, making them easy prey to autocratic regimes whose internationally acknowledged legitimacy is mere pretence. "If people like it, who am I to judge" about sums up the foreign position. Never mind if what the people (read the natives) like is media-imposed, enforced and popularised. Never mind if many in these militarily and culturally oppressed countries do not go along with the agenda of the new internal form of oppression. What the intelligentsia of the West have not yet realised is that many of the ruling

* 29.4.1999.

establishments in their one-time colonies have decided to play on their sense of guilt to wangle a form of tacit validation for a new brand of oppression — all the more lethal because it comes from inside. They are asked, in the name of respect for otherness, to condone dominant discourses and repressive laws that restrict peoples' freedom of action and sometimes physically mutilate them into the bargain.

At the Amman Festival for Independent Theatre (AFIT) this month a German theatre scout was outraged by the sight of a policeman kicking an old woman in the street. His first impulse was to complain in an open letter to the press. What finally restrained him was not knowing the repercussions his action would provoke against the festival. Mind you, he said, there is a lot of police brutality in Germany; but when we find out about it we complain.

Yet compared to other Arab theatrical events, AFIT has managed to create an open forum for discussion and genuinely democratic dialogue between artists across national boundaries. Moreover, it has succeeded, over six consecutive years, in guarding its independent status, widening its audience base and network of friends and associates and creating a real sense of partnership with its many private and public donors as well as the local authorities, particularly the municipality of Amman. The financial survival of the festival hangs on the ability of its workaholic founders, Al-Fawanis and Al-Warsha troupes, to project a community-based vision of theatre that can convince artists, sponsors and the public that they have a stake in cultivating an independent theatrical movement, and to articulate the needs and concerns of this movement in a way that enthuses the world of money and politics without entailing serious compromises. In this respect, the core

function of the festival is not to present top-quality performances in theatres suited to the purpose, as is the case with most festivals, but rather to create encounters between artists of different nationalities and cultural backgrounds to exchange experiences and explore ways of collaborating, making theatre away from governments and promoting intercultural understanding and creative freedom.

One such encounter was the Second Arab-Euro Theatre Meeting in which artists from Europe, Africa and the Arab world, including Iraqis and Palestinians living in Israel, as well as representatives of the Ford Foundation Arab Arts Projects and members of the Informal European Theatre Meeting (IETM), met to discuss their needs and share their visions and dreams. And the remarkable thing was the absence of the factious spirit and overblown rhetoric that usually characterises such meetings.

Many practical matters were addressed: the need for an efficient information system; the crucial importance of creating spaces for artists to work in; the possibility to continue working for a long term without constant insecurity; the need for artistic and management training structures which provide support for young theatre artists; the role of the European festival organiser who wants to invite Arab theatre companies and all of the contradictions this involves; and, of course, money.

In this respect, the Tunisian model of securing state support without state control was particularly useful and I hope it will be adopted by other Arab ministries of culture. According to Izzeddin Qanoon, founder and director of the Tunisian Theatre Organique, the company sells a number of performances to the Ministry of Culture to

cover the production costs and depends for the rest of its budget on the box-office, touring contracts and sundry donations. Other practical models and concrete proposals were given, including an arts management course to be launched in Cairo this June by the Arab Arts Project, a tri-lingual periodical publication (in Arabic, French and English) to provide background and up-do-date information about Arab theatres and a communication network, based in Europe, to facilitate contacts between Arab and European theatre. On the issue of funding, serious questions were raised and debated, particularly the hidden agendas of some funding agencies and the criteria on which funding decisions are made. The reactions to this fruitful meeting, however, were not universally positive. On Sunday, 11 April, the English-language *Jordan Times* reported that the anti-normalisation committee of Jordan's 13 professional associations had launched a boycott of AFIT on the grounds that it is financed by foreign sources and foreign groups participate in it. Furthermore, the paper continued, the committee had asked the Amman Municipality to take same stance on the issue, to keep in harmony with public opinion and hold festivals that are purely patriotic.

In the Arab world, foreign funding is often regarded as a surreptitious form of cultural invasion and a threat to Arab cultural identity. In Jordan, where unions and professional associations are dominated by Islamists, the opposition takes a more extreme form and is bound up with the question of Arab-Israeli peace. Over the last year, according to the *Jordan Times*, the unions have stepped up their campaign against seminars, conferences and other events organised in cooperation with foreign institutions, claiming they are part of a Zionist infiltration of Jordan's intellectual and cultural life. This attitude, which

brands all foreigners as spies and subversive agents, and any Arab who deals with them, or even talks to them, as a traitor, is, to say the least, unreasonable and can only serve the interests of fanatics and cultural isolationsists. Equally unreasonable is the siege imposed by many Arab cultural bodies on Palestinians living in Israel whose only crime is that they did not leave their land and have to carry an Israeli passport. The anti-normalisation campaign against the festival was fueled by the invitation to the festival of Al-Qasaba Theatre, a group from East Jerusalem whose members, all Palestinians, have never received support from the Israeli Ministry of Culture or cooperated with it. Yet, however ugly and unjustified, this attack nonetheless served to strengthen the credibility of the festival as a forum for genuine democratic dialogue.

The organisers invited their opponents, supporters, and Arab Israeli guests to a press conference to openly debate the issue. It does not matter that many of the zealots stuck to their guns till the end, turning a deaf ear to the Palestinians' anguished pleas for solidarity and support and their moving expression of the ordeal of being regarded as unwanted outsiders by both Israelis and Arabs. What matters is that the bomb was defused through democratic dialogue.

The festival continued as normal, proving every day, through its many workshops, foreign and Arab shows and collaborative events and activities, the value and validity of its agenda of open-minded cultural and human interaction. And as if to make it up to Al-Qasaba artists for the pain and humiliation they suffered at the ungracious hands of the zealots, the Jordanian public gave them a warm and rousing reception.

Their adaptation of George Shahadah's *The Emigrant from Brisbane*, in which the setting was transposed to Palestine, was a good specimen of the company's work. Proficient acting, efficient use of space, imaginative evocation of atmosphere and states of mind through movement and lighting, serious topics, a lavish use of humour and local colour, and a tendency to cut deeper than the conventional surface of things and provoke reactions other than laughter define its style and explain its wide popular appeal. The ordinary life of simple Palestinians is vividly portrayed without sentimentality or false heroics. Racked by suspicion and torn between greed and honour, the village men who are told that one of their women (who is not named) once had an illegitimate child by a man who after years abroad has died, leaving the child a fortune, are alternately brutal, befuddled and endearingly weak and pathetic.

Equally vigorous and emotionally robust was *Abu Arab: Trapped in the Corner* — a one-man show improvised and performed by Ali Abu Yassin of Al-Bayader Troupe in Palestine. In the style of a *hakawati*, or itinerant story-teller, Yassin gave us a strong and pungent taste of the reality of daily life in Gaza as experienced by a simple Palestinian worker. The narrative is episodic, anecdotal, and interspersed with satirical comments and topical jokes. Like all good *hakawatis*, Yassin has a strong presence, ready wit, a talent for mimicry and the ability to engage the audience actively in the show. This last trait reached a peak at the end when the actor walked up to the audience and said: "Look, I don't know how to end this play. We tried one version in which the worker decides not to cross into Israel to find work and we were bitterly criticised for not being realistic and accused of stigmatising the thousands of Palestinians who earn their living in Israel. So we

changed it, and the worker went to Israel; but the intellectuals objected. Better starve than compromise, they said. Now, I leave it to you to end it the way you like." Given with such stark directness and urgency, the problem puts the audience, rather than Abu Arab, in a difficult corner.

Palestinian daily life featured once more in the Jerusalem-based Theatre Day Productions' revival of Sadalla Wannus's *The Glass Café*, but in a grotesque, metaphoric vein. The tomb-like café, with its ghostly visitors, demented clients and eternal routine of backgammon, insect-hunting and coffee-drinking, ruthlessly exposes the apathy, cowardice, indifference, futility, and blind self-involvement of its inhabitants and ends with an apocalyptic prophecy of disaster.

Palestine was also the theme of the Tunisian *Looking for Aida*, written and acted by Jalilah Bakkar and directed by Fadil Ja'aybi, with the accent on *Al-Naqba* and the experience of the Palestinian Diaspora. But despite the elegiac mood (which moved some to tears), Bakkar's overpowering presence, sincerity, control of tone and refined economy of expression, and notwithstanding Ja'aibi's sophisticated mise-en-scene and subtle use of lighting, many, including Palestinians, found this monodrama embarrassingly simplistic, sentimental and facilely romantic. A cathartic script which romanticises Palestine out of existence is how I would describe it.

Dictatorship, tyranny and oppression came second on the agenda of Arab shows, providing the theme of the rambling, bombastic and self-indulgent Jordanian *Dreams of Sheherazade*, the figuratively complex and passionately outspoken Iraqi *Hollow Men*, and the Irbid Art Theatre Troupe's *The Tyrant and the Mirror*. Less directly, it informed the visually exuberant Tunisian *Love in Autumn*; Alfred

Farag's *The Last Walk* (competently performed by Vanya Exerjian) which centres on gender oppression; Jean Genet's *The Maids*, performed by Kuwaiti drama students; the Iraqi *Sidra*, based on a Sumerian legend and directed by Fadil Khalil in a solid classical style; a Belgian production of Slawomir Morzek's *Out At Sea* where power takes the form of cannibalism; and the Tanzanian *Death of a Coconut Tree* by the Bagamoys Players, in which the tyrant (an ugly capitalist) is punished with sterility.

To provide relief from the pressure of politics there was a joint Swedish-Jordanian concert from the Backa Theatre Musicians and the Rumm Troupe; the stunning *We Can't Hold Our Breath Any Longer* by the ALIAS Dance Group from Switzerland; Kris Niklison's *M/F* from the Netherlands; two delightful evenings of song, dance, and story-telling from the Egyptian Al-Warsha; the haunting Australian *The Descent* by The Chapel of Change group; and Enrico Labayen's *Puirt a Beul and Other Dances* programme from the USA. (Puirt a Buel, I am told, is the name of a type of Gaelic music). For further relief, there was a lot of partying and some excursions to the historical sites of Jordan, and I personally spent a delightful day in the open air at Daret Al-Funoon (House of Arts) observing the Image and Movement Workshop given by the Bonheur Troupe from the Netherlands.

Despite all the politics and heated wrangling, the festival managed to give Amman two weeks of vibrant cultural activity and a lot of food for thought. It also gave the city an appealingly dégagé air, like a party tent pitched for just one night.

By the Waters of Babylon...

Hazy images of a misty future and ghostly past in Oman*

Oman is a land of magic and mystery — all the more so because it seems utterly unpopulated. A hellish spot where the combination of heat and humidity make it a travesty of paradise. The rugged mountains sweeping majestically to the deep blue waters of the gulf, the many ancient castles, the sumptuous palaces, the quaint mediaeval market place in Nizwa (120 kilometres outside Masqat), and the many white villas dotting the landscape like white pigeons perching there for just a moment, are all breathtakingly beautiful. It makes for an enchanting vision that reaches you through the firmly closed windows of an airconditioned limo or Mercedes that speeds madly through deserted roads and leaves you vexed, tantalised, frustrated and with a disturbing sense of unreality.

In May, Oman dissolves in a mist of heat and shuns the company of mortals. For five months or more, the plain-dwellers are doomed to their hi-tech iceboxes, unless they choose to migrate to the mountains and cool hill tops. There it is different, even now, said my car driver; you would need two blankets to keep warm, he added. What was he doing here in humid, sultry Masqat, ferrying the guests of the Sixth Gulf States Theatre Festival from one stately mausoleum to another? I asked.

* 27.5.1999.

He had just come back from a two day walk with friends across Al-Jabal Al-Akhdar (the Green Mountain), he told me, dwelling with sensuous relish on the coolness of the mountain springs and streams and the delicious, mystical sensation of utter solitude. He had no interest in theatre whatsoever and no curiosity about the event which had drawn so many foreigners to his land. As far as he was concerned, we were indulging in a very expensive game for reasons he could not construe. He was there only for the little money he could make out of the occasion.

What age was this thin wiry white-bearded Nasser? I wondered. He switched on the radio and listened with the profound, tolerant cynicism of ancient sages to some professor expounding in highfalutin language his vision of the future and the challenges facing Oman in the third millennium. I began to wonder, not for the first time, if time as concept and process was the same for everybody, and whether it moved at the same pace in all countries. For six days we were catapulted between images of a past, dimly remembered, richly mythologised and decked out with folds of nostalgic wrappings, and a future thickly shadowed with a pervasive sense of anxiety and clouds of doom and gloom. It was difficult to reconcile those images with the luxurious surroundings of the gorgeous Bustan Hotel where performances took place, and it needed a tremendous leap of the imagination to sympathise with the various plights of the characters portrayed on stage.

More disturbing still was a tenuous, elusive entity — another elaborate theatrical pageant. Not surprisingly the most dramatic event in those six days in Oman had nothing to do with theatre or the festival. On the last day, long after the closing ceremony, when all the

excitement caused by the announcement of the awards had abated, the news that Netanyahu had conceded defeat in the Israeli elections ran like an electric current through the hotel, causing all the Arab guests to rush out of their rooms and jubilantly embrace in the corridors and lobby. The sheer vicariousness of that overwhelming sense of victor — a victory for democracy scored by another nation — put Arab reality in its true perspective. Suddenly the vague feelings that had been worrying me for days, the nagging sense of unreality, became focused in one question: if theatre is all about pretending, how long can it survive in a world where what is passed off as reality is mere pretence?

There we were, perfectly sane people from Europe and the Arab world, spending hours each morning discussing intricate intellectual issues and technical questions relating to theatre, and watching and analysing performances every night, when we perfectly knew that the basic condition for the existence of theatre — the freedom to ask and act — was nonexistent or, at best, severely limited in the majority of Arab countries. I do not know about other guests, but for me it was a great effort to mentally adjust to the fact that *The Death of the Singer*, a lyrical, elegiac piece that mourns the passing away of traditional Arab music, came from Saudi Arabia — a country where there are no public theatres and women are banned from the stage. More credible, but barely so, were Qatar's *The Songs of Shamali*, which revived an old legend about the man who first invented the sail to cast the present in a most unfavourable light; Bahrain's production of Sadallah Wannous's *A Day from Our Times*, which predictably excised the most shockingly outspoken scene in the play, reducing it to sentimental mush; and Kuwait's *Oh, Ya Mal* (the opening of a traditional ballad), about the exploitation of poor fishermen in the past by rich pearl-merchants. The

United Arab Emirates entry (from Dubai) was more cunningly relevant, featuring a hero who lives off the glories of his ancestors and ends up losing his wife and home — an obvious parable about the loss of Palestine. But by far the most daring was the Omani *Coming Back From the Future* where the tower of Babel was the dominant metaphor, superimposed on oil drills and electricity towers, and where the inhabitants of the Arab city of the future were portrayed as babbling idiots.

You may have gathered that what I have written here is prompted by a real sense of crisis, a gruelling awareness of the schizophrenic nature of most of our cultural practices, and a pressing need to hold on to my faith in theatre and my profession. If it sounds pessimistic, I have no apologies.

Grapes of Wrath

Some theatrical responses to the Intifada*

In times of war, artists are always called upon, or feel impelled, to put their art in the service of the battle. In most cases, the art produced on such occasions proves of little durable value and is promptly consigned to oblivion once the conflict is over or, alternatively, put in cold storage to be dug out, warmed up and dished out once more if a similar crisis occurs. At best, it can serve as a cathartic emotional outburst or an impassioned morale-booster; at worst, it can degenerate into crude, naïve propaganda, churned out for immediate local consumption at the behest of a usually specious authoritatian regime.

Luckily, the Egyptian theatre (and all theatre, I suppose) is notoriously tardy in this respect. Since the October war in 1973 and the storming of the renownedly invincible Barlev line by the Egyptian army, many critics, intellectuals and important people in the media have been wondering in dismay at the failure of the Egyptian theatre to rise to the occasion and record this momentous event in a grand and rousing heroic drama. Ironically, the best work done in theatre on this war has focused on its dark, conveniently ignored, side: the fate of the small soldiers — the Woyzeks of this world — who gave everything, and when the time came to reap the fruits of victory, got nothing. In one such work, Hamdi Abdel-Aziz's *An Egyptian Tale, or a Diary of the Plague*, the simple peasant, Saber, who volunteers to fight the Israeli foe, returns to his village after the war to realise that he has been robbed

* 22.3.2001. In Arabic.

of everything by the masters for whom he risked his life. When he complains, he is curtly hustled to the madhouse.

When Al-Aqsa *Intifada* broke out last autumn, theatre artists here felt they had to do something and started a feverish search for suitable texts. Any play dealing with the Arab-Israeli conflict, however distantly or obliquely, or which could be altered to accommodate it, was unearthed, dusted out, and fitted with new songs and scenes to link it to the present Intifada. *Rape*, an adaptation of Antonio Buero Vallejo's *The Double Story of Dr Valmi* by the late Syrian playwright, Sa'adalla Wannus, was a prime candidate. Featuring the sadistic torture of Palestinian freedom-fighters at the hands of their Israeli jailers, it argues that no society can condone the practice of brutality against its opponents without itself becoming brutalised. The production presented by the Rafah Cultural Palace Company, on a make-shift stage, in a tent pitched in the Actors Union club a few months ago, dwelt on the harrowing torture scenes, highlighting the savagery and fanatical zeal of the torturers, and bracketed the play with wistfully nostalgic palestinian folk songs. It was a rough-hewn work, full of crudities and ham-acting; but for some reason, perhaps because the group came from Rafah and had first-hand experience of what was taking place next door in Gaza, the performance communicated an unbearable feeling of pain — almost like a raw wound. One critic, however, took the company to task over their choice of text, complaining that it showed some of the Israelis as human beings, capable of self-questioning and having moral scruples and qualms of conscience. Fortunately, most directors are not deterred by such criticism and appreciate the play's fair-mindedness, dialectical force and human complexity. Two months after the Rafah company production, Sayed Khattab directed it for the Giza Cultural Palace

Company and presented it at Al-Hanager in the context of the Arab Theatre Festival mounted by the Egyptian Society for Theatre Amateurs (ESTA) from 15 to 27 February. Indeed, the whole festival was dedicated to the Intifada and featured revivals of *Che Guevara*, by the late Palestinian poet and dramatist, Mu'in Bassisu, *The Mountebank*, by the Moroccan Abdel-Karim Barchid, *The Clown*, by the Syrian Mohamed El-Maghout, and *The Gypsy* by the Egyptian Bahig Ismail. All are political parables which blame the loss of Palestine on dictatorship and the fear, ignorance, and passivity it forces on the people; and all were adapted in some degree, in one way or another, to invest them with a sense of urgency, immediacy and topical relevance.

Other revivals are planned, some already in the pipelines. They include: Alfred Farag's documentary drama, *The Fire and the Olives*, Mohamed El-Maghout's political cabaret, *Your Glass, My Country*, Mahmoud Diab's epic play, *Conquerors' Gate* (in three different provincial productions) and Yusri El-Gindi's chronicle paly, *The Lost Jew* — all from the 1960s. New texts, freshly penned, like Hisham El-Salamoni's *The Enemy in the Bedroom* and Sayed El-Imam's *Blood on the Clown's Hand*, are announced too. The Intifada was also instrumental in bringing to the stage one long neglected play. *The Pound of Flesh*, by the late drama scholar Ibrahim Hamada, based on *The Merchant of Venice*, premiered at Al-Salam Theatre in mid-February.

Most of the people behind these productions will tell you that they do them not just for their own satisfaction, as a form of self-expression and moral support for their Palestinian brethren, but, more importantly, because they feel it their duty to instruct the younger generations in the history of the Arab-Israeli conflict and make them aware of the threats

posed by the Jewish state. Sadly, however, many of these nobly-motivated shows are sparsely attended and fail either to reach or attract their targeted audience. Is it lack of publicity? Bad artistic management? Or has television, with its vivid documentaries and live coverage, rendered such shows redundant and made them seem pallid and lifeless by comparison? Or could it be, as I sometimes feel, that what is happening in Gaza and the West Bank is so horribly tragic and so nightmarishly real that it seems almost obscene to sit quietly in the dark and watch it displayed, discussed or analysed and, worse still, expect to derive some aesthetic pleasure out of doing so? I frankly confess that I frequently suffer bad bouts of embarrassment when I watch such shows nowadays and often remember Wordsworth and acknowledge the wisdom of his definition of art as "recollection in tranquillity;" and the key word here is transquillity. But with so much violence, so many young people, even children dying everyday and most of the Palestinian population living in dire straits and sinking below the poverty line, how can one have tranquillity?

The dilemma which inevitably faces any director keen on supporting the Intifada and fighting for it from the stage is how to do his duty by it without neglecting his duty to his craft or betraying the art form he works in. The most recent production dealing with the Arab-Israeli conflict (currently playing at El-Tali'a theatre) amply illustrates this dilemma. *Under the Sun* is a reworking by director Fahmi El-Kholi of a play called *The Umbrella*, written by Sameh Mahran more than a year before the Intifada. Mahran's text starts in a realistic vein with a middle-aged couple — a smug but tetchy husband and an outwardly complacent but secretly sulky and disgruntled wife — sitting on the sea shore in one of those posh villages on the north coast. The

husband, we learn, has spent the best part of his youth abroad, working in some oil-rich Arab country to make his fortune, spending only one month a year with his wife. He is now back for good, has invested his money in a flat, a car and a chalet, and is finally ready to embark on the long delayed project of begetting an heir. When a rich family who own a villa in the same village invade the couple's privacy and force them to relinquish the umbrella for which they (the couple) had paid an exorbitant sum of money as part of the compulsory amenities that go with the chalet, the husband rushes in rage to complain to the village manager. In the course of their conversation, the play drops off its realistic mask, revealing itself as a political parable in which the rich family represents the super powers, or, more accurately, the United States, with the helpless manager as the ineffectual United Nations. When the thuggish family smash up the husband's new car to punish him for daring to complain, he literally goes raving mad. The wife is forced to lock him up in his room, and the first act ends with him banging frantically at the door and ranting and railing against her. The play could have easily ended there and it would not have been a bad thing. But Mahran wanted to give the socio-political satire contained in the first act a wider significance by linking it, in a somewhat mechanical way, to the Palestinian *nakba* and the sense of alienation experienced by Palestinians in the disaspra.

In the second act, which could also stand alone as a self-contained play, a Palestinian male invades the husband's room or, rather, his mind, and leads him through a looking-glass, like Alice, on a journey into the past to discover the origins of their present misfortune. On the way, they meet a fortune-teller who only mystifies them with her ambivalent utterances. The journey ultimately leads them to the city of

Shechem, in the land of Canaan, where they watch the biblical story of the rape of Dinah, (the daughter of Jacob and Leah) by Shechem, (son of Hamor, the Hivite, who was chief of the region), and the terrible revenge of her brothers (as told in Genesis: 34) reenacted before their eyes. Though Mahran substituted love for rape, making Dinah willingly surrender to her lover, the moral of the story is clear: there can never be peace between the Arabs and the Israelites and the peace treaty between Egypt and Israel has been disastrous for both Egyptians and Palestinians — an awful mistake that ought to be corrected. Armed with this revelation and a spear, Issa, the husband, sets forth at the head of a small surrealistic contingent of headless soldiers to wage war on the usurpers of his umbrella and the rights of his Palestinian friend and ends up in a mental ward.

Director Fahmi El-Kholi altered the structure and tone of the original text, introducing the Palestinian as a presence in Issa's mind from the very beginning, cutting out all the funny mad scenes, making the husband and wife a young, attractive, romantic couple, and the village-manager a sexy female, in a dark, tight leather suit, alternately cracking a whip and clicking her brass castanets while belly-dancing. The tragicomic end was replaced with fervent patriotic declamation and, with the help of Hamdi Abul-'Ela's lyrics and Gamal Mustafa's melodies, the tone of the play became on the whole affectedly earnest and doggedly sentimental. But how on earth can one reconcile this anxious pursuit of seriousness and high emotionalism with the frivolous pink, spangled salopette worn by the wife, the erotic presence and dancing of Abir El-Saghir as Miss UN, or (and that is the cruelest cut of all) with the ludicrous sight of grown, bearded men, freshly circumcised, walking with their legs far apart, while holding their

gowns up and away from the sore spot and groaning loudly? The circumcision of the Canaanites on the suggestion of the Israelites (as a condition to their approving their daughter's marriage to Shechem but in reality a trick to incapacitate and easily kill them) is mentioned in the biblical story and was intended by the author to symbolise the political impotence of the Arabs inflicted upon them by their rulers' selfish whims. But however good the intention, it is incredible to assume, and expect the audience to believe, that the sight of such men could inspire the hero, or indeed anyone with patriotic fervour or a sacred passion for revenge.

Equally disconcerting was the constant invasion of the stage by a small army of hooded extras in black, carrying long mirrors and continuously moving round the actors. El-Kholi obviously intended the mirrors to break up the stage image into many reflections and create a visual metaphor for the confusion and fragmentation which dominate Arab politics and life. Effectively, however, his extras (who seemed genetically incapable of holding a mirror still even for a second) only succeeded in blinding the audience with the lights flashed by the mirrors and getting into the way of the actors.

It was ironic to think that El-Kholi's zeal to champion the Palestinian cause had made him blind to the elements which could have best served his purpose without pomposity or brashness, while his keenness to secure beauty and vitality for his show had landed him with facile and garish visual solutions. With the theme of madness removed, and with it all the comedy, the couple romanticised, and the cause sentimentalised, *Under the Sun* seemed hopelessly belaboured, oppressively affected and distressingly simplistic.

Put Out the Light

Jibran Khalil Jibran's *The Blind**

In *Clowns* — the title story of a collection of short stories by Sanaa Seleha (GEBO, 2000) — a severely myopic little girl is given a pair of eye-glasses one day and ordered to wear them to improve her sight. She does, and is suddenly confronted with a different, alien world, thoroughly ordered and off-putting — a world of harsh, unyielding lines, stark contours, and stiff divisions. Her world before was a throbbing conglomeration of blurred masses, hazy shapes and shifting shadows, constantly swimming in a soft sea of fluid light that kept changing its intensity and colours.

The experience was novel and disorienting. For a while she enjoyed the stability, firmness and geometric clarity of this new world; but it soon began to bore her. It was too sober, too predictable, devoid of mystery and fun. It held no surprises. Before she had the spectacles, she never knew exactly what lay ahead of her beyond a few yards; it could be anything. And although that was frightening at times, and often embarrassing (since the could not see anyone who greeted her across the street, or at a distance, and looked as if she was deliberately ignoring them, which earned her an unfair and painful reputation for discourtesy and arrogance), it was, all the same, thrilling and exciting; it kept her guessing all the time, trying to puzzle out the identity of things and people. With the specs too, she began to lose the habit of identifying things partly by their feel and smell, of holding them close to her face, to her eyes.

* 12.7.2001. In Arabic.

What she missed above all, however, were the little clowns that used to frisk among the leaves of the tree facing her window, or suddenly leap onto her father's forehead and start dancing whenever he argued with her mother or sounded angry. They even popped up in the classroom every time the teacher called her a dunce for failing to read what was written on the blackboard. It made her laugh to see them jumping up and down the teacher's mouth, which always made the teacher raise her voice and call her a moron. (It was after a phone call from the teacher to her father that she was taken to a doctor and given the specs.) She equally pined for the curious, big creatures that used to race high above every time the light dimmed and water dropped from the sky and her mother ordered her to stay inside. She would ignore her mother and sneak out onto the balcony to feel the strong wind buffeting her, while everything around whiled and danced in an ecstasy of motion. The fact that she got better marks at school now and people stopped scolding her for dropping or bumping into things or getting nearly run over by cars, and never called her ill-mannered again, never consoled her for the loss of the lovely clowns and flying creatures.

Jibran Khalil Jibran's *The Blind*, one of two forays into drama by this enormously popular Lebanese-American émigré poet and painter (1883-1931), originally written in English and recently translated into Arabic for the first time and performed at Al-Salam theatre (the Yusef Idris hall) — strongly reminded me of the myopic girl in *Clowns*. It seemed to continue the same argument, but in a more extreme form and in the rich mystical vein characteristic of all Jibran's work. In both, what is universally regarded as a defect, a handicap, is viewed from a new, startling perspective and presented, not as a lack, a deficiency impairing human consciousness but, rather, as a special quality yielding

an alternative perception and a different mode of being. Indeed, both works seem to argue that this different perception is superior to the ordinary — richer, more poetic and intense. Jibran goes a step further and claims for his blind hero not only exceptional intuition and insight, but a direct link with heaven. This takes the form of a guardian angel who is seen watching over the hero throughout the play, occasionally making profound remarks.

But Jibran's spirituality here is pantheistic rather than abstractive; it does not see spirit and matter as irreconcilable opposites, locked in eternal conflict but, rather, as one field of energy in which the spirit manifests itself in the motion of matter and matter becomes a living organism, a world, when penetrated by the spirit. It is a fervent spirituality of the mystical type which often inspires a feeling akin to sexual passion. Through Ann, the blind hero's step-daughter who adores him and voluntarily shares his sightless world by shutting her eyes and living as a blind person, the play suggests that the intense physical intimacy of the blind with the world — its material shapes, smells, textures and sounds — provides them with the kind of knowledge the Buddha meant when he advised his disciples to shut their eyes (literally) to the outward aspect of the world and listen intently to apprehend the truth, or, to use Jibran's words, "to get into the heart of life." With the Buddha one remembers Tiresias, Cassandra and a host of other mythical and fictional figures, for this view of blindness is not uncommon in literature. What distingsuishes Jibran's treatment of it in this play, however, is, curiously, the powerful sensuality with which it is invested. Ann's love for her step-father is deeply spiritual, a kind of mystical union; but the ardour which imbues her words and confessions, together with the intense physical closeness

of the two — inevitable, since blind people, or those who act as if they were, have to identify and help each other mostly through touching — produces, especially in performance, a definite erotic impact. Ironically, the mother's jealousy of this intimate friendship between her daughter and her husband and the daughter's unveiled hostility towards her — though meant to condemn the mother (who carries on a secret affair with a younger lover) as a vain, superficial, mean-spirited and earth-bound libidinous creature — help to focus this erotic undercurrent and foreground it in the spectator's mind.

On the realistic level, the play seems like a sordid tangle of incest and adultery, with the five characters forming two interconnected amorous triangles. This explains why the play (published with his other play, *Lazarus and his Beloved* in *Dramas of Life*, 1981) was not translated into Arabic earlier. Presumably Jibran's intent in this was to juxtapose two kinds of love — physical lust and spiritual passion — and to argue that the latter was stronger even than blood ties, traditional allegiances and social taboos. But it was a risky proposition; were he a lesser poet, such sleazy stuff could have easily sunk the play into the sexually titillating. Whatever success he had in carrying out his plan was solely due to the luminous transparency of the dialogue, its poignant lyricism, and the intricate interplay of the metaphors of light and darkness. The physical presence of the angel on the scene helps too, since neither couple is ever alone to enjoy complete privacy.

For a group of young actors to choose this play, in these repressive times, is an act of courage; to present it so well and movingly is an artistic feat. Realising the challenge these young people were taking, the translator, Maher El-Battuy, who lives in New York and works for the

UN, waived his translator's fee to help them get the go-ahead with the production from the State Theatre Organisation. The actors and artistic crew (with Mohamed Ibrahim directing) — all friends and students or graduates of the Theatre Institute — were paid next to nothing; and the set (by Ahmed Abdel-Aziz), a simple wainscoted study, with a desk, a rocking chair and a fireplace, was unobtrusively elegant and cosy, and very cheap to execute. It was obvious in every detail of the performance that everyone who had a hand in it loved it and was inspired by it. Husam El-Shazli, as the blind hero, was simply entrancing, drawing everyone on the tiny stage and in the small auditorium into a magical circle of light, spun out of darkness — the light Jibran meant, a light never seen on land or sea. His performance set the tone and tempo and all the actors joined in. Marwa Abdel-Moneim (as Ann), Liqa Swidan (as her mother), Ahmed Safwat (the Angel) and Amr El-Qadi (as the lover) strove valiantly to capture and body forth every feeling and nuance, however subtle and elusive. They kept us under Jibran's spell for 35 minutes, the duration of the play, and, afterwards, I found myself shutting my eyes tight and trying to feel my way out of the theatre.

Time is Out of Joint

The premiere of Saadallah Wannus's *A Day of Our Times* at Al-Ghad Hall*

When I heard that director Amr Dawwarah was rehearsing Saadallah Wannus's *A Day of Our Time* at Al-Ghad theatre I was thrilled. At last lovers of Wannus's work were going to see this ferocious, deliciously outrageous satire on the mores and morals of our times in a live performance. It was too good to be true. When Wannus wrote this play in 1993, breaking a dramatic silence which lasted 13 years, he couldn't get it published anywhere in Syria and though it appeared a year later in the Egyptian literary periodical *Adab wa Naqd* (Literature and Criticism) and in the Lebanese *Al-Adaab* (The Arts) magazine in 1995, before it was printed in 1996 in his collected works, there has been only two productions of it so far, if I remember correctly, both performed in relatively censorship-free events: one by a Jordanian troupe, performed at the CIFET, and another by a fringe troupe from Bahrain, at the Amman Free Theatre Festival, some years ago. Apart from these I know of no professional Arab director who dared to touch it before Dawwarah embarked on his current production.

This is not surprising in countries where freedom of expression is severely curtailed and public performances are heavily censored. *A Day of Our Times* is simply too verbally audacious, too shockingly outspoken. In five scenes, which take the form of violent

* 7.8.2003. In Arabic.

confrontations punctuated by narrative passages and comments by the author in a voice-over, Wannus traces the progress, or, rather, plummeting of his hero from innocence to experience, from blissful ignorance to a terrible awakening and from hope to the depths of despair. Farouk, an idealistic, happily-married mathematics teacher at a girls secondary school in a small town discovers one morning, through a brawl in his classroom, that some of the girls, all of them from respectable families with fathers in high office, frequent a chic, cunningly camouflaged brothel run by a wealthy and beautiful woman called El-Sit Fadwa. Shocked and horrified, he questions the girls but is brazenly told to mind his own business. When he appeals to the headmaster to open an investigation he finds him busy trying to track down the culprit who has sribbled offensive political slogans against the head of the regime all over the walls of the school toilets. This is a far more serious offence, he is told, since loyalty to the regime is "the mother of all virtues" and the major task of the school. Moreover, he is roundly admonished for speaking ill of El-Sit Fadwa who is praised by the headmaster as an upright citizen and generous benefactress.

Not heeding the headmaster's direct warning and his veiled threats not to meddle in this business, Farouk resorts to the mosque in the next scene to seek the help of its Imam, Shekikh Metwalli. He finds him recording his daily radio *Fatawi* programme and listens to his promous, obscene drivel about the ideal Islamic toilet practice — a perfect parody of such programmes. When innocent, pious Farouk broaches the subject and asks for advice he is, first, severely rebuked for not attending the Friday lessons, then treated to a long, impassioned

harangue denouncing all schools and secular education in general as useless, pernicious and the work of infidels and the devil and harshly censured for slandering a pious and charitable lady like "El-Sit Fadwa" who donates generously to the mosque. Nowhere in Arab drama can you find such savage lampooning of religious teachers and preachers as you get in this portrait of the venal, hypocritical, bigoted and thoroughly obscene sheikh.

When Farouk, now thoroughly confused and dazed, decides to inform the father of one of the girls, who happens to be the governor of the province, he is subjected once more to a lecture, this time about the virtues of crass materialism, the market ethos and the need for moral resilience. To illustrate his point, the governor cites the example of one of his employees who after years of loyal service suddenly went berserk, hurled obscene abuse at all his bosses, then stripped naked and peed on everybody in sight. Though we never see this poor civil servant, driven mad by years of silently watching rampant corruption or, according to the governor, by his failure to adapt and move with the times, he is so vividly evoked by Wannus that his grotesque, pathetic image acts as an ironically bitter emblem for the whole play. When Farouk finally manages to blurt out his information, asking the father if he knew that his daughter was a regular visitor to the notorious house, the father retorts breezily, but quite maliciously too: "Of course. It is where she met your wife and made friends with her. Your wife is very popular there and El-Sit Fadwa is very fond of her and pampers her. You are a very lucky man."

The fourth scene inevitably carries the devastated mathematician to the sorceress's enchanting, mirrorlined den to verify the truth about his

wife. Finally, we get to meet El-Sit Fadwa about whom we have heard so much, and by the end of the scene, Wannus has built her into a metaphor for life, with all its paradoxes and contradictions, all its pleasures and sorrows. Though he resists her seduction, the poor school-teacher is unable to condemn her, and this adds to his confusion. He rushes home, not to avenge his honour, but to hide from a world in which he feels a complete alien. He has lost all his anchors in reality; everything he had ever believed in has crumbled and turned to dust. Feeling utterly alone, in a place and a time where he does not belong, as he keeps reiterating, he could find refuge only in death. But he doesn't travel alone; his wife too feels that the world, or El-Sit Fadwa, has seduced her, robbed her of her integrity and reduced her to a tattered rag. The play ends in a suicide pact with two embracing corpses. Admittedly, this is the stuff of melodrama *par excellence* and Wannus makes no bones about it. The play, however, never comes across as melodramatic. The rage and pain are all too genuine and inform every line; the handling of the scenes and management of the dialogue are imbued with a tough sense of irony and the verbal texture has the richness and evocative power of poetry without sacrificing its uncompromising honesty or sardonic humour.

I had been so looking forward to seeing this text in action on the stage. Now that I have seen it I do not know whether to celebrate or lament, applaud or boo. The choice of cast, led by Sohair El-Murshidi, in a welcome comeback to the stage after a long absence, is admirable and guarantees good acting. The directorial conception, which takes inspiration from the many mirrors lining the walls of El-Sit Fadwa's pleasure dome, is quite intelligent and saves on the production costs to

boot. Instead of assigning each character in the play an actor, Dawwarah makes El-Murshidi and Mamdouh Darwish play all the negative characters in the play, with each performing as many as five different parts. El-Murshidi plays the headmaster, the governor's assistant, the radio-broadcaster who interviews Sheikh Metwalli, El-Sit Fadwa, as well as her aged father in the sketch about her former life she enacts before Farouk to convince him that she was as much sinned against as sinning. Darwish plays the school supervisor employed by the regime to spy on both pupils and teachers, Sheikh Metwalli, the governor, El-Sit Fadwa's *valet de chambre* and her former, brutal, mercenary husband in the short play-within-the play. Not only does this allow them plenty of scope to display their technical prowess, it also creates an eerie effect that all the evil forces are distorted reflections of each other, lending conviction to the hero's growing sense of disorientation and of the flimsiness and instability of the world he moves in, despite the very realistic sets. By contrast, Farouk 'Eita and Hanan Metaweh do not double in other parts but remain Farouk, the teacher, and his wife, Nagat, throughout. This endows them with a firm sense of reality, making them seem the only solid presences in a world otherwise populated by shifting appearances, insubstantial shadows and transient reflections.

No amount of good acting or directing, however, can mend what the censor had hopelessly spoilt — which is the text. At his orders chunks were hacked, whole scenes (like Sheikh Metwalli's radio talk) were completely rewritten and rephrased in a more polite idiom, and many words, particularly those that referred to organs or parts of the body, were replaced with euphemisms. It was as cruel as plucking out

the teeth and fangs of a lion and removing its claws to consign it to the circus ring. The censoring process left us with a tame, docile text that had no bite. The hero's raging against the world and its sinful ways, however, was mostly left intact (he is after all a romantic idealist and does not use offensive words), and so was the final repentance and suicide scene. Should one be grateful for that and go along with the old Egyptian proverb — *Nus el-'ama wala el-'ama kuluh* (To be half-blind is better that not to see at all)? I, for one, do not feel particularly grateful.

Riding a Rough Wave

The premiere of Sa'dallah Wannus's *Ahlam Shaqiyya* at Al-Hanager*

Two oppressed women, both unhappily married, share an old, humble house in a small Syrian town. The temporal backdrop is the early sixties, during the political witch hunt for socialists and Nasserists which followed the breakdown of the Syrian-Egyptian political merger. The first woman, Mary, the owner of the house, is an ailing, middle-aged, pious Orthodox Christian, married to a selfish, wily, strutting dud and inveterate sponger who has infected her with gonorrhea on their wedding night. Sexually ignorant like most Arab, middle-class females of conservative families, and shy of broaching sexual matters with anybody, it takes her years and a traumatic miscarriage in the sixth month of her pregnancy to discover the cause of the burning pain in her bowels, the incessant, foul-smelling discharges that constantly soil her underwear, making her loathe her body, and her fast deteriorating health.

The painful treatment she undergoes avails her nothing since her husband (ironically called Faris, i.e., Knight), like most Arab males, refuses to see the doctor, regarding the mere suggestion as a terrible insult and blusters that he is perfect in every way. When he is finally coerced into having himself medically checked it is too late; the disease has made him sterile. In despair, and thoroughly disgusted with men and sex, Mary consigns herself to a celibate, lonely existence, slaving away her days at her sewing-machine to support herself and the man

* 16.10.2003. In Arabic.

her religion forbids her to divorce and orders her to cherish, honour and obey. Every night she prays passionately for a mircacle that will bring back to her the son she lost before he was even born; and when she sleeps, she relives in weird nightmares the agony of the moment when her husband spat on the fully-formed tiny body, wrapped it in a dirty rag and went off to get rid of it. Whether he threw it into the river, as he said, or on the nearest rubbish dump, she could never be sure.

The second woman, Ghada, is a young mother who was once a brilliant student and had hoped to go to university and have a career. Unfortunately, like many women in the Third World, she was stopped at home on the brink of higher education and coerced by her father into marrying her cousin Kazim — a stupid, brutal police-assistant who never went beyond primary school and who daily abuses her physically and mentally. Like Faris, Kazim, though a Muslim, demands of his wife complete, unconditional submission and total obedience – the qualities most valued in females by patriarchy and enshrined in the name of religion, tradition and culture.

Like Mary, Ghada finds solace in the memory of a lost loved male. She once had a brother whom she adored; they were soul mates and constant companions — "real chums", she tells Mary. They had dreamt together, read the same books, chatted deep into the night and hoped to go to university together. But when the brother got the chance to study abroad he betrayed her. He did not want to spoil his last days at home opposing his father's will and standing up for his sister's rights. He went away promising to defend her cause from afar but soon forgot. As the years passed, his letters to her became shorter, fewer and further between. But Ghada kept on writing everyday. What else could she do?

These are the two women whose portraits Sa'dallah Wannus has drawn in clear, unwavering lines, with passionate care and stunning empathy in *Ahlam Shaqiyya* (Anguished Dreams), in 1994, three years before he died. Like all the heroines of the plays in the final phase of his career, they go beyond protest to put Arab society and the whole of its culture on trial, questioning with ruthless, uncompromising honesty its most hallowed precepts and basic assumptions, including its attitudes to women, love, sex, marriage, and even homosexuality, incest and conjugal fidelity, and trace the insidious, invisible link between political, social, sexual and religious oppression. Here, as in *The Rites of Signs and Changes* (written the same year), or in *Drunken Days* (1997), "the sexual" is definitely and irrefutably "political"; Kazim's job as a policeman whose sole duty is to hound political dissenters and Faris's jubilation at the prospect of becoming a secret political informer and Kazim's watchdog, not to mention the brutal battering Ghada undergoes when she voices different political sympathies and the whipping she undergoes when she asks for divorce — all these details strongly identify sexual with political oppression, designating both as varieties of moral corruption. The root cause in both is the same.

The drama in *Ahlam Shaqiyya* (an ironical, ambivalent title, like the rest of the play, which could at once mean anguished or naughty dreams) is set in motion by the arrival of a new lodger — a young law student whom Mary, in her hazy mental state, induced by long, suppressed suffering, takes to be the son she lost as a foetus. Ghada, on the other hand, falls in love with him, at the same time identifying him in her imagination with her beloved, absent brother. He brings joy, light, hope and comfort into the drab, arid lives of both women and lightens the burden of their obscene existence. Predictably, the

husbands are not pleased and conspire to get rid of this new mock-saviour who has sown the seeds of rebellion into the hearts of their meek women. When the lodger (significantly named Beshir, which at once means evangelist and bringer of glad tidings) disappears one night, the two women decide to take revenge and poison their husbands. The only person who dies, however, is Ghada's son. Like Faris, Kazim is not shaken by the tragedy of losing a son and is intent on hushing up the matter. He will not allow anything, not even his wife's attempt to murder him, which she freely confesses, or the death of a son, to spoil his career as a rising member of the political police.

This may seem melodramatic to anyone who has not read the play or seen Mohamed Abul Su'ood's breathtaking staging of it at Al-Hanager. You would also be justified if you thought that the dramatic schema of parallels and contrasts outlined above was somewhat precious or a bit chichi. But wait. This is not the whole story. After four strictly realistic scenes which introduce us to both families separately, then show us the two wives vowing to protect Beshir, followed by the two husbands conspiring to get rid of him, Wannus plants into the heart of the play what amounts to a bombshell. In the central fifth scene, realism gives way to surrealism and we are plunged with the two women and the lodger into an eerie, collective dream. Here, the characters in the play melt into each other; they "split, double, multiply, dissolve ... (and) ... coalesce," the way August Strindberg described in his author's note to *A Dream Play*. We see the mysterious Beshir for the first time, but as a multiple character, at once a young man in the fields, at harvest time, ordered by his father to kill his beloved sister because she fell in love, thereby disgracing the family; as Mary's dead son come back and about to depart; and as Ghada's absent

brother and present lover. As the images change and merge, Beshir becomes at once a son/lover/brother, with all the incestuous shades such a combination casts. Ghada, on the other hand, merges with the image of Beshir's beloved sister who walked into the river and drowned herself to save him the ordeal of killing her. The role of Beshir's father in the dream is taken up by Faris, but not before he has grown a female breast which oozes a black, ill-smelling discharge from its nipple. By the end of the scene, when Kazim walks in to shoot Beshir (realistically or figuratively, one can never be sure), the initial, puzzling question of whose dream it is has given way to more profound and unsettling questions about the nature of love, reality and identity. When the play reverts to realism after this scene, it seems like an altered form of realism, shot through with intriguing, disorienting revelations and informed with a harrowing sense of tragedy. No room for melodrama there.

To stage a play like this, and stage it almost whole, with only Ghada's redundant scenes with her son wisely removed, sticking faithfully to Wannus's verbal texture, however offensive or abrasive it gets, and to do this with great beauty, insight and consummate skill is not only a laudable artistic feat but an act of great courage and genuine moral integrity. Apart from its captivating beauty, Abul-Su'oud's cunning and well-thought-out audio-visual frame not only crystallised Wannus's vision with forceful clarity, but created many an intriguing irony. The scenes were heralded and punctuated with Mohamed Abul-Kheir's enchanting voice, providing vocal accompaniment which consisted of carefully selected lines from the Old Testament — from The Song of Songs, The Psalms, The books of Job and Leviticus — and chanted, hymn-like, against the low, deep humming of an *orghul*

(a long, double pipe wind instrument used in folk music bands) in the musical mode of Islamic songs of praise (*madih*). It was as if the Christian Mary and the Muslim Ghada had joined through a male voice (a substitute for Beshir?) in a passionate supplication for deliverance. And how better to express the two women's longing for love and physical fulfillment than through the sensuous imagery of The Song of Songs?

Visually, the twin set representing the two humble households (designed by the director) was conceived and executed with meticulous attention to realistic details, but without clutter, and its subtle touches of subdued elegance were indicative of the refined nature of both women. But the really ingenious directorial touch was framing the whole set, at the back and on both sides, with reproductions of five beautiful icons by the 14th Century Russian painter and monk, Andrei Rublev (1360/70-1430). Rublev's simple, intense compositions and bright colours, with such combinations as orange, red, vermilion and turquoise, communicate a sense of joy and serenity. Indeed, it is said that his works were criticised by his contemporaries for deviating from the canons and were considered to be "very joyful" and "devoid of fear of the Lord". But it is not only the perceptive choice of the icons and the way they were softly lit by traditional kerosene lamps that one admires, but also their cunning deployment around the stage.

In Mary's room, Rublev's *The Saviour* stood right behind Faris's couch, on the side edge of the proscenium arch, creating a telling contrast and a painful irony. *Christ in Majesty*, with its cheerful red, white and orange, hung above Mary's bed, close to the large window on top-left representing Beshir's room. What a contrast to her drab, colourless life and what an eloquent manifestation of the rewards she

expects in heaven. The door of the room which connects the two parts of the set carried a reproduction of *The Transfiguration*, the most joyful of all the icons, in a huge irony that deepens the pathos of the situation and intensifies the sense of hopelessness. But the hugest irony of all was planting a reproduction of *The Holy Trinity* at the back of the other part of the set, on a door which is supposed to lead into the room occupied by Kazim, Ghada and their child, and fringing the room on the side, at the edge of the proscenium arch, in a parallel line with the icon of *The Saviour* at the other end, with a reproduction of an enlarged detail of the same *Holy Trinity* icon. Hugging the stage on every side, the icons at first communcated a sense of comfort. As the play progressed, however, and the ugly revelations multiplied, they became oppressive and their meaning grew disturbingly ambivalent. Were they a shield against despair or a siege that imprisoned the two women eternally? Exquisite and intelligent audio-visual interpretation and framing has long been the hallmark of Abul-Su'oud's productions. This time, however, with the help of Mohamed Abul-Kheir's soundtrack, Mohamed Hosni's lighting plan and Abu Bakr El-Sherif's excellent execution of it, this brilliant young director seems to have surpassed himself.

But however beautiful and cunning the frame, *Anguished Dreams* could not have worked without the highest calibre of acting. It is a tricky text which flirts with melodrama while keeping it at a distance, where reality often hovers on the edge of madness and nightmares. It requires an intense degree of awareness from the actors, close attention to tone and sensitive shading. Abul-Su'oud was extremely fortunate in having veteran actress Aida Abdel-Aziz, with her immense talent, vast experience and strong, earthy presence, lead the cast as Mary. She is of

that brand of actresses who can tailor any part to fit their measurements yet manage to persuade you in the end that theirs is the way it was originally meant to be. Aida's Mary was not the frail, shaky, pathetic woman I had imagined when I read the text. She was vigorous in her sorrow and simmered with dangerous, pent-up fury. Slawa Mohamed Ali as Ghada was another happy choice. She gave a sharp-edged, finely nuanced, low-key performance which was intensely moving. Her emotional restraint and austerely economical vocal and physical score gave the character's suffering a certain dignity and beautifully contrasted with Ali Abdel-Azim's strident and studiedly brash performance as Kazim. Gaunt and wiry in build, with thick, black eyebrows, Abdel-Azim communicated a sense of menace even when still and silent and managed to hint at an innate sense of inferiority behind the stern, ruthless façade and the impulsive eruptions of violence. Ali Hassanein as Faris was alternately cocky and servile, but fittingly flamboyant in both moods. Though he injected a lot of humour into the part, he was careful to preserve the basic meanness of the character. For Beshir, Abul-Su'oud chose an actor with experience as a dancer, and Hani El-Mettenawi's physique and lithe movements made him convincing as a dream-like figure.

It only remains to say that an uncensored *Ahlam Shaqiyya* would have been impossible without Hoda Wasfi's courage and determination. It is a credit to her that she was able to convince the censor to let it pass in honour of Wannus. It is also a credit to Madkour Thabit, the public censor, that he listened to her. The rewards were immense and one hopes that this enlightened policy will continue. *Ahlam Shaqiyya* has proved that with enough courage, faith and conviction, one can ride even the roughest of waves.

Old Tune, New Resonance

Alfred Farag's *Suliman Al-Halabi* at the AUC*

In the afternoon of Saturday, 14 June, 1800, during the French campaign on Egypt, 24 years old Suliman El-Halabi, a Syrian from Aleppo studying at Al-Azhar, was arrested in the garden of Al-Azbakiyya palace, the site of the old Shepherd's hotel, close to where Cinema Diana stands now in Al-Alfi street. An hour earlier, in the same spot, the body of General Kleber, who had succeeded Napoleon as commander-in-chief of the French Orient Legion, had been found with multiple stabs in the chest and abdomen.

Questioned in the presence of the new army commander, General Meno, Suliman said he had spent three years at Al-Azhar before going back to Aleppo for a while when his father fell sick. He had arrived back in Cairo only a month ago, on 18 May, had called on Kleber's palace in Giza that morning (14 June) to seek employment as a clerk and had followed the general from Giza to Al-Rhoda, to the Armenian Barracks, down to Al-Azbakiyya palace simply because he wanted to see him face to face. He denied meeting the Ottoman Grand Vizier in Syrian before coming back to Cairo, taking any orders from him, or discussing the assassination with any of his colleagues or teachers at Al-Azhar. Under torture, he confessed that he had confided his intention to four intimate friends, assuring his investigators that they had done their best to dissuade him. This cut no ice with the French and three of those friends were promptly captured and summarily hanged.

* 13.5.2004. In Arabic.

Suliman himself was accused of being a foreign agent, hired by the Ottomans to do the murder for 40 Piasters, and was condemned to death by impalement. It was a clever political sentence, intended at once to discredit Suliman in the eyes of Egyptians before he could acquire the status of a hero in the popular mind, deter prospective imitators by the sheer brutality of the mode of death, and, by shifting the blame on the Turks, foster the illusion of a thoroughly subjugated and, therefore, peaceful and docile colony.

History is recorded by the victors, they say, and in the criminal museum in Paris, the shrivelled, embalmed head of Suliman, labelled "Head of a Murderer," stares at you from inside a glass cabinet. This, and a vivid description of the actual assassination by the 19th-century historian Abdel-Rahman El-Gabarti, a few scattered lines in history books and the French *proces-verbal* of the investigation is all that remains of Suliman. If only his head could speak the truth, tell us what he did during that fateful last visit to Cairo and what thoughts passed through his head. It is tempting to think that it was the sight of this pathetic, speechless head which prompted Alfred Farag, in 1964, to start another investigation of the incident and try to imaginatively delve into the mind of El-Halabi to discover his motives — and this may well have been his original plan. Reading the play, however, one senses a divided interest, a conflict of directions, and nowhere is this more clearly discernible than in the structure.

Designed on the model of Brecht's epic theatre (popular in the 1960s), the play has no traditional plot and consists of short, loosely connected scenes, spanning four acts and less than two months, and carefully edited to project events in different locations taking place simultaneously. It also features a chorus of narrators/commentators

who alternately stand outside the events as detached observers or step inside El-Halabi's mind or that of Kleber to engage them in an internal dialogue which questions their actions and motives. The result is a vast panoramic view of a country under a particularly savage form of foreign military occupation, with occasional insights into the power relations of oppressor and oppressed and the underlying beliefs which inform them. In the middle of this epic construction, however, Farag plants an intellectual hero of potential tragic proportions and with distinct Hamletian echoes. The tension between the epic and tragic modes dilutes both to a certain extent, resulting in many unnecessary, rambling scenes and blurring the dramatic/ideological focus of the work.

From the very beginning of the play, even before he sets foot in Cairo, El-Halabi seems firmly and irrevocably set on his course. While still in Aleppo, he is haunted by dreams of sitting in judgement on Kleber and punishing him for the many war crimes he committed against the Egyptian people. Why Kleber in particular is never explained, unless you regard Suliman as a homicidal megalomaniac who wants to achieve fame by killing the most famous person within reach — as, indeed, one of his friends in the play angrily describes him. Throughout the play, except for a long monologue near the very end, he does not show any signs of wavering in his conviction or doubting the absolute justice of his cause. This precludes internal conflict of any kind or the possibility of character development. Indeed, all Farag's efforts to invest his hero with Hamletian features — a meditative cast of mind, a rich imagination and a predilection for clowning in moments of crisis — and to develop his obsession with justice into a moral dilemma remain purely verbal, superficial and come to naught.

Set against harrowing reports of terrible oppression, mass devastation, of looting, burning, killing and ruthless extortion, El-Halabi's decision seems perfectly natural and morally justified. The objections of his colleagues are not moral but rather strategic. They need more time to bury their victims, catch their breath and rally their forces before launching another attack against the French. Meanwhile, they will try to undermine the morale of the invading army by circulating leaflets telling the soldiers that while they die the wealth of Egypt is smuggled to Paris to fill the coffers of their leaders. The wisdom of this policy is borne out by the rage of Kleber on discovering these leaflets. Despite his friends' warnings that his action, while achieving very little in the long run, would bring down the French on Al-Azhar, the cradle of the resistance, and result in collective punishment and indiscriminate, mass hangings, El-Halabi refuses to listen and, except for a fleeting moment of hesitation near the end, relentlessly embarks on his plan like a mad fanatic with a self-appointed holy mission.

Asked by the chorus in a final confrontation why he chose to kill Kleber rather than any of the Turkish rulers in his country who terrorise his own people, he tells them that he could only kill "rationally", for a just cause, but never out of personal vengeance. Doesn't this turn him as a self-professed judge into a cold-blooded murderer? They ask. "Yes," he answers; "life itself is one such paradox: the judge wears the garb of the murderer and the murderer that of the judge and together they make up Suliman El-Halabi." Such casuistry could hardly pass for a tragic moral dilemma and in the subsequent dialogue El-Halabi is openly compared, both by the chorus and himself, to a holy man executing the will of God — a man who has "purified" himself of all

earthly failings and human feelings, whose heart can no longer feel pain or misery, fear, weakness, or even joy. Of such stuff fanatics are made, not tragic heroes, and El-Halabi's total self-absorption, overweening pride, self-righteousness and feeling of moral superiority defeat all Farag's attempts to enlist our sympathies in his favour.

To explain the play's muddled sympathies and confusing structure one should, perhaps, look beyond it to the time it was written. It is possible that, like many of his contemporaries, Farag, once he got to work on his material, could not resist, consciously or otherwise, using hisotry as a mask through which to comment on the present. In the 1960s, memories of the British occupation of Egypt were still fresh in the minds of Farag's generation and in his preface to the play he pointedly compares the assassination of Kleber in 1800 to that of the general commander of the British forces in Egypt, Sir Lee Stack, in 1924. But it is not to the British occupation that the play seems to point. The 1952 coup d'etat managed to get rid of the British but not of military rule. Nasser's military dictatorship, masquerading as the rule of the people, was even harsher and more pernicious and hatched at least one known attempt on his life in Alexandria in 1954 (the year that marks his emergence as dictator). Farag had personally experienced the rigours of the new regime, spending a term in prison, as did most intellectuals at the time, and eventually forced into self-exile. At certain points in the play, the historical mask thins out to a dangerous point as Farag's anger seems to get the better of his craftsmanship and he vents his rage through his characters.

Listen to this: "You call this a life ... that people live nowadays? No, death is infinitely better than such a life ... Look at us ... We are

dressed in shame, made to feed on remorse and dangerous ideas constantly peck at our minds. Evil eyes follow our every movement, like serpents loosed by vicious wizards; they sneak behind us to the table to put us off our food, to work to distract us from it, to bed to plant thorns there. They have opened the gates of hell, made it the rule of life and it throbs and burns through our veins. Kneel and submit ... Surrender your manhood to humiliation, your children to the fangs of hunger and your neighbour's neck to the hangman's noose. Come on, come on, kneel, submit and live ... live to fill your eyes with dust and stuff your mouth with rubble ... Live to be metamorphosed by the black magician from a man to a dog." One wonders who is speaking here: Suliman or Farag? The metamorphoses of humans into dogs under military rule, as a recent Ph.D. thesis, *The Worldview in the Theatre of the 1960s* by Hamdi Abdel-Aziz, has established, was a recurrent motif in all the plays of the period. What the above passage describes is life in a modern police state (not under foreign occupation) — an experience familiar to Farag but alien to his hero and the historical context of the play. In a sense, one could regard the play as a kind of cathartic exercise intended to relieve its author's frustration and purge him from a destructive passion through the figurative killing of Nasser disguised as Kleber.

Using a condensed version of the play, Mahmoud El-Lozi's current production at Falaki centre goes to great lengths to emphasise its link with the present. Modern dress is consistently used for all, including the Azharite students and their leader, Sheikh El-Sadat, who is arrested in a shirt and trousers, and the set (by Stancil Campbell) is historically neutral. On one side of the avant-scene, a stone prison cell (which could belong to any age or country, depending on what you put in it)

harbours the chorus/singers (Ahmed Bahgat, Ahmed El-Tonsi and Yusra El-Lozi) who, apart from saying their lines, punctuate the scenes with a significant selection of satirical songs from the Ahmed Fuad Nijm/El-Sheikh Imam politically hot repertoire, popular among Egyptian university students in the 1970s, which defines their time as Sadat's era. Having identified the reign of Sadat, through the cell and songs, as an extension, albeit in a different guise, of Nasser's military dictatorship which the text targets, El-Lozi goes a step further to argue that though Nasser and Sadat are dead nothing has changed. With the help of Campbell (as lighting designer) he managed to visually transform the whole auditorium into an extension of the chorus's cell by projecting over it a lighting pattern of crisscross bars whenever the lights came up on the cell.

But while the cell and chorus were visually and aurally firmly planted placewise in Egypt, the rest of the stage, together with the central and side aisles of the auditorium had a triple geographical identity. In the original play, part of the set represented a spot in Aleppo and the rest, several palces in Cairo. In the current production, the set — a single structure consisting of a one-story building, with two windows and a large front door, flanked on both sides by wide stairs leading to a flat area on top, with the silhouette of a chain of hills at the rear — still indicated Aleppo and several places in Cairo; on these, however, it superimposed a new location: Baghdad.

To achieve this, El-Lozi adds an opening scene (vividly reminiscent of the opening scene in Khaled El-Sawi's recent hit, *Messing with the Mind*). In it, a group fo soldiers rampage through the auditorium, waving guns and screaming orders and insults at us in a distinctly

American accent, while blinding spotlights glare at us from the stage and a famous American song (which I am told was made after September 11) plays at a deafening volume, blaring to the world something to the effect that "We" (Americans) have the right to 'bring' (forcibly impose?) freedom to the world. And as if this was not enough, to drive the point home, we were treated after the interval to a travesty of an American talk show in which a silly bimbo of a star is interviewed amidst rounds of applause about her recent trip to *Egypt* (not Baghdad) and asked how the natives felt about "our fine boys who are doing a great job there." A while later, El-Lozi sneaks in another scene of a brawl between American soldiers which ends with one shooting himself — a pointed allusion to the stories of American soldiers committing suicide in Iraq.

Indeed, from the very first scene, the identification of the old French campaign on Egypt with the recent American invasion of Iraq is clearly established in the staging, and the subsequent identification of Egypt (past and present) with Iraq follows as a kind of warning to all Arab countries. What happened to Egypt two centuries ago is happening now in Baghdad and could happen tomorrow to Syria and other Arab countries, seems to be one message. Another strives to establish a causal link between the nature of the ruling regimes in Arab countries and the threat of foreign invasion, thus preserving Alfred Farag's original identification of internal with external military oppression, and goes a step further to hint at a kind of collusion between them. One is clearly reminded here how once upon a time Saddam was the darling boy of the American administration.

With all these double visions and superimpositions you cannot expect the eponymous hero to emerge unscathed. Angry and in modern dress, he looks like any young Palestinian or Iraqi civilian you see on television and his grim determination to exterminate Kleber, knowing full well that the attempt means his certain death and brutal, retaliatory collective punishment for his people, transforms him at the end, as he delivers his last monologue, alone, in a spotlight, on the dark, empty stage, while Ravel's *Bolero* plays softly at the back, into the nearest thing to an Iraqi or Palestinian suicide bomber — redefined as a freedom fighter, not a terrorist. By the end of the production you realize that here, it is the vanquished, not the victors, who are made to write history.



Jose Triana's *The Criminals* at the National*

Cuban drama was virtually unknown in Egypt until the late sixties when Jose Triana's internationally acclaimed *La Noche del los Asesinos* (1965) became available in French and English subsequent to its staging in London at the Aldwych in 1967. An Arabic translation, based on the French, soon appeared and was staged in both Cairo and Alexandria. This was more than 25 years ago, but many critics still remember those productions and speak of them with zest and admiration. One reason, I suppose, is that Triana's text, which offers a cruel dissection of the family and its power relationships and exposes the moral bankruptcy of middle-class life, captured the angry and frustrated mood of Egyptian intellectuals and artists at the time and lent itself to political interpretation. Another reason is the play's brilliant and innovative dramaturgy, palpably influenced by Jean Genet's *Les Bonnes*, which was in tune with the experimental spirit of those years. The Egyptian theatre had discovered the Absurd, the so-called Theatre of Cruelty, the Existentialists as well as Brecht, Peter Brook and Peter Weiss, and productions of Beckett, Ionesco, Albee, Sartre, Genet and Camus, among other avant-gardists, has become a feature of the theatrical scene.

But then the bubble burst; the lean years followed and the mainstream theatre pursued a lighter mode of theatrical entertainment. While homegrown plays became fewer and progressively more

* 1996. In Arabic.

anaemic, productions of foreign texts became a rarity, only to be found at the A.U.C., the Theatre Institute or on obscure regional stages. If some misguided text happened by any chance to blunder its way into one of the major theatres, it was invariably subjected to a gruesome process of hauling and mauling, dilution and oversimplification — major surgery that entailed ripping it open, amputating various scenes and stuffing the carcass with insipid songs and silly dances. This tortuous process is generally euphimistically labelled 'adaptation'.

Triana's *La Noche*, currently at the National, had the good fortune of not undergoing this savage treatment in full. There were the compulsory songs and dances, but they were kept to a minimum, and so were the textual alterations. Ali Khalifa's production stuck to the basic structure of the text which, in two acts, portrays three adolescents locked into an attic or basement and playing out, in a ritualistic act, their fantasies of killing their parents. In the first act, they act out the murder; in the second, a reenactment and the trial. The text makes great demands on the performers since each of the characters assumes different roles throughout the play, ranging from those of the other characters present, through those of the parents, to the roles of outsiders, such as the representatives of the law.

I guess that Khalifa's choice of *The Killers* (the title of the play in the English translation) was prompted in part by the increasing incidence of patricide and matricide in Egypt in recent years and the wide media coverage these crimes usually get. It is certainly a play with a hot, relevant issue. Khalifa, however, seems to have been daunted by the awesome seriousness of the subject, the morbid atmosphere of the play, its emotional intensity, ritual component and haunting, dreamlike

quality. He decided to lighten the mood, distance the subject emotionally from the audience and inject as much humour into it as possible. Apart from the few songs and dances, he let the actors (Khaled El-Nabawi, Rania Farid Shawqi, and Mona Zaki), who are all well-known stars, use their real names of stage, and opted for an external style of acting that relies heavily and openly on parody and mimicry: in other words, they played it for laughs. This, together with Ibrahim El-Fawi's elegant set, which resembled a cosy, cheerful nursery, with tiny red and white chairs, put paid to any chance of emotional involvement with the subject. The play lost its ritualistic element, its psychological intensity and veered off in the direction of didacticism, becoming more like a parable or a lesson to parents. Contrary to the macabre atmosphere of the original, on the night I attended the performance, the audience seemed disconcertingly happy and cheerful, laughing and clapping regardless of the parents' doom. Certainly the choice of text was brave and daring; but too many concessions to what is generally assumed nowadays to be "what the public wants" defanged the play and turned it into a pale imitation of itself.

Another Curse of the Pharaohs

Two ways of representing Ancient Egyptians on the stage*

One everning, 15 years ago, at the end of a party at the Beacon Primary School in Exmouth (a small sea-side town on the south-west coast of England), and while I, with the other mothers, armed with mops and brooms, were busy cleaning up the mess, one of my daughter's friends approached me gingerly and asked: "Do Egyptian live in little pyramids ?" I was so startled and tickled by the question I found myself waving my broom dramatically and saying: "Oh, yes. And everyone has their own little camel parked outside." It was not that my daughter had been spinning yarns about Egypt to her friends behind my back and letting her imagination run riot; little Linda has simply seen too many travel posters sporting the Pyramids, the Sphinx, the desert and nothing else. For her, that summed up Egypt.

Over the years, our zealous efforts to build up the tourist industry have unwittingly resulted in propagating an image of Egypt as a land of sand, sumptuous sarcophagi, majestic tombs and funerary temples. In the process, the passion for life and its pleasures, which informed the Ancient Egyptians' intense preoccupation with immortality (including the immortality of the body) and the after-life (pictured as a replica of the earthly one) has been frequently mistaken for a morbid obsession with death. But if this ridiculously spurious image of Ancient Egypt can

* 23.10.1997. In Arabic.

be excused in the highly competitive realm of tourism, it cannot be stomached in the realm of theatre. Indeed, at the risk of sounding sacrilegious, I must admit that I have reached a point where the mere mention of pharaohs or Ancient Egypt in connection with a performance is enough to make me run a mile.

In a wildly misguided quest for 'authenticity', directors have had us repeatedly suffer the excruciatingly embarrassing sight of puny, undernourished extras with spindly legs, dressed in short, linen kilts and sandals, and parading in broad, bib-like necklaces and some sort of Pharaonic headgear, while struggling to assume the rigidly linear postures of the human figures in Ancient Egyptian reliefs and paintings. The result is usually a lurid array of contorted limbs and I have often wondered if anyone in their right mind could really believe that our distant ancestors went about their daily business, farming, hunting, building pyramids and homes and making love with their palms turned rigidly upwards (in front of the chest or sideways) in continual supplication. Unfortunately, these stylised positions have become established theatrical signs for representing Ancient Egypt and recently surfaced in the National's current production of the story *Sinuhe*, wreaking havoc.

The damage was exacerbated by director Teymour Abashezde's skimpy, superficial handling of the narrative, evident in the absence of any directorial conception or point of view, in the disconcertingly facile adoption of the hero's perspective, and the unquestioning endorsement of his flimsy explanation of his motives and interpretation of his actions. To circumvent any criticism of his failure to make this ancient story significant or in any way relevant to today's audience, Abashezde

asserts in the programme that he has deliberately chosen not to interfere with the narrative in any way out of respect for the scholars who had gone to so much trouble to put it together from several papyri; and, indeed, what we get in his production is an unexciting, straight-forward recitation of the collated text, monotonously delivered by three actors and a chorus, and punctuated with bewildering ballet sequences to relieve the boredom.

Abashezde has obviously carried the virtue of 'non-interference' to absurd extremes. In the reading, the story proves a much more exciting experience: it springs vexing questions and reveals teasing gaps that the reader has to grapple with in order to make sense of the jumble of episopdes and adventures and discover the underlying logic binding them. The first and most intriguing set of questions that face the reader have to do with Sinuhe's character and the reason behind his flight from Egypt: Why did this Middle Kingdom official in the court of Amenemhet I, who obviously enjoyed the king's favour since he was entrusted with his harem, decide to flee the country upon learning of the king's assassination? Was it simply fright or something more sinister? And it if was fear, of what or whom was he afraid ? The story is opaque in this respect and Sinuhe evasively explains his action in terms of "the will of fate". Subsequent events make this explanation even more dubious and unsatisfactory since they reveal Sinuhe as a tough, ambitious man who succeeds in insinuating himself into the court and favour of a powerful Syrian chieftain, marries his eldest daughter, accumulates wealth and power, and ends up an invincible warrior and veritable patriarch, entertaining emissaries to and from Egypt.

The end of the story raises other questions: If Sinuhe wanted to spend his last days in Egypt and be buried there, why didn't he simply get up and go? Why did he have to wait for the Pharaoh's forgiveness and permission? What was there to forgive? And why did the Pharaoh, Sesostris I, shower him with gifts and favours on his return and order a fine tomb built for him?

Such questions and others are blithely ignored in the National's production where the director is content to let his cast, costumed in a weird medley of styles, declaim the "authorised version" of the story, with many histrionic gestures, in the middle of thick clouds of artificial smoke.

What a relief it was to escape the silly visual gimmickry, the vulgar pharaonic paraphernalia, and the grating vocal pomposity and discordance of the National's *Sinuhe* and surrender oneself to the magic of Intisar Abdel-Fattah's *Humn* at El-Tali'a next door. The image that greets you from the stage as you walk in, in the soft light, is at once austerely geometrical and richly evocative. A still human figure, lying flat and covered with a thin white sheet, occupies centre stage with two women, in rough grey growns, kneeling at its head and feet, and draping their long black hair over it. At the back, the chorus of grey-clad women and barechested men, sit cross-legged, ranged on two tiers, while the leader, a woman dressed in black, like a typical peasant from Upper Egypt, occupies the centre of the third, top tier, completing the pyramidal structure. Sitting up there, on her chair, with her hands serenely resting on her knees, and the light outlining her basic form against the black backdrop, and lending it drama by means of strong chiaroscuro, she seemed a vivid, living incarnation in the present of the

distant past, a concrete metaphor for the elusive thing we call, for lack of a better phrase, the enduring essence of Egyptianness, or what Gamal Himdan has called "the genius of the place".

Flanking this pyramidal formation are two males on one side, a singer and a drummer, and two female singers on the other. The auditorium itself is likewise flanked at the back by two long staircases, down which two girls slowly descend, one wielding a curious, bell-shaped, twanging musical instrument (Intisar picked it up in India and has forgotten its name), and the other rhythmically beating two short wooden sticks, and approach the stage to announce the beginning of the performance. Another curious figure joins them: a half naked man, with a tree and a serpent tattoed on his back.

When these figures reach the stage, the drama begins, and by that time, the stage and auditorium have been figuratively transformed, through the stage composition and the deployment and movement of the human figures in the space, into the inside of a pyramid. Fittingly, the drama we watch is of birth and death and the cycle of life; and it is played in movement, in black and white, to the accompaniment of a haunting, original musical score for voices and percussion instruments. Here, as in his previous works, particularly the unforgettable *El-Darbukka*, Intisar, a composer turned director, turns the most ordinary of household objects into musical instruments, adding a wealth of new, exciting sounds to the familiar repertoire. And the chorus are also the orchestra.

Composed of sound and movement, *The Hymn* observes a delicate balance between its aural and visual elements and weaves them into an intricate, highly sophisticated artistic composition that impresses the

viewer as being at once familiar, accessible and very lifelike, and yet remote and enduring. Like the Ancient Egyptian sculptors of the Old Kingdom, Intisar is primarily concerned here with the basic forms and the essentials; every lesser detail he leaves out. No wonder the duration of the work is only (and precisely) 35 minutes, and no wonder, too, that it has about it a kind of moving solemnity and graceful simplicity that one does not easily forget.

When the Carnival Turns Bitter

The first production of a Tagore play in Egypt*

In view of the wide and far-reaching popularity of Indian films in Egypt, not to mention the long historical ties between the two nations, it is quite amazing how little the ordinary Egyptian theatre-goer knows about Indian drama. A few years ago, when Indian film star Amitabh Bahchan arrived in Cairo for the International Film Festival, he was mobbed at his hotel by hordes of screaming fans and one of them, a veiled female, was so overcome with emotion, she tore off her veil and promptly fainted. Those young people could easily reel off the full list of Bahchan's films and glibly converse about them; but try popping the name Rabindranath Tagore at any theatre audience and they would look at you blankly, with wide, innocent eyes. "Isn't he some sort of poet" is the brightest answer you could hope for.

Back in the sixties, Tagore was better known in Egypt. India's celebration of his birth centenary in 1961 had its repercussions here in the press in the form of numerous articles on the life of the man and his work. In most of these, however, the accent fell heavily and almost exclusively on his poetry — understandably, perhaps, since it was a book of poems (*Gitanjali* or *An Offering of Songs*, as the poet himself called it in English) which won him the Nobel Prize for literature in 1913. If his dramatic works (which number over fifty and span a period of almost 60 years) got any mention at all, it was usually cursory and adumbrated. In those days, when literary translation was booming and theatre offered a wide-ranging miscellany of texts, one would have

* 1997. In Arabic.

expected Arabic versions of some of Tagore's plays and at least one production of any of them. Unfortunately, only one play, *The Post Office* (*Dakaghar*, 1913) was done into Arabic and the project to produce it at the Pocket Theatre soon evaporated.

It took 35 years since interest in Tagore began to bring one of his plays to the Egyptian stage. Not surprisingly, it was a young, newly formed experimental group who accomplished this feat. Last week, at the permanent home of *Al-Ghad* (Tomorrow) theatre company, a newly built elegant chamber theatre, adjacent to The Balloon, Tagore's *Raja* (or *The King of the Dark Chamber*, 1910) opened. Like most of the great poet's well known plays, it is a difficult, challenging text, heavily weighted with symbolism. For like his great Irish contemporary and fellow Nobel-Prize-winner, William Butler Yeats (whose plays seem fated to a similar neglect in Egypt), Tagore strove after an original and authentic dramatic mode that could accommodate the lyrical and mystical side by side with the dramatic, incorporate song, dance and mime as organic elements and, above all, dramatise the 'activity of the souls of the characters', in Yeats's words, and 'the rushing journey of the soul.'

Curiously, at about the same point in their careers, both poets developed an intense interest in music, movement and ritual; the result, in each case, was a series of symbolic dance dramas, or 'plays for dancers' as Yeats chose to call them. In this area, however, Tagore was at an advantage: while Yeats restricted himself to the style of the fourteenth-century Japanese Noh drama he discovered in 1916 (combining it with various Christian and other supernatural themes in verse plays like *The Dreaming of the Bones* (1919) *Calvary* (1920),

The Cat and the Moon (1926) and *The Resurrection* (1934), among others), Tagore had a vast store of indigenous forms of theatre and a long tradition of Sanskrit classical drama and Bengali folk-drama to draw on. Unlike Yeats, he did not have to struggle against the conventions of Western-style, picture-frame staging and could freely choose whatever aspect of Western drama suited his work.

Chitrangada (1936), a reworking of an earlier verse drama called *Chitra* (1892), is, perhaps, Tagore's best-known dance drama. Its central theme is the meaning of physical and spiritual beauty in the relationship between man and woman. The same theme informs *The King of the Dark Chamber* which was written in 1910, within eighteen years of the early *Chitra*. The recurrence of the theme at different stages of Tagore's life reveals an intense, life-long preoccupation with it. This is not surprising in a man who was also a philosopher, who called the educational institution he founded (in 1901) the 'abode of peace' (Shanti Niketan), who lived ascetically and celebrated his way of life in a play called *The Ascetic* (*Sanyasi*), and who as early as 1890, when he was only twenty nine, portrayed sacrifice, in a play that bears this name, as a propitiation ritual and death as a triumph.

In *The King of the Dark Chamber*, the questioning of the true meaning of beauty acquires a pronounced mystical dimension and this is achieved through a deliberate and systematic subversion of our traditional notions of light and darkenss. All the elements of the drama — the lively, suspenseful plot, the bustling action, the intrigue, the songs, the carnival that turns bitter and the many role-reversals — move in the same direction, and the final message is unmistakable: true beauty cannot be found in the outward shows of this world, in the deceptive

play of light and shadow; it has to be sought for at the heart of darkness.

In tackling *The King* (translated somewhat awkwardly by Abdel Ghani Dawood and Ahmed Abdel Fattah), director Samih Mugahid had to bear in mind the logistics of Al-Ghad company and make do with a relatively small cast. This entailed some cuts, some doubling by the actors, some merging of characters and the excision of some. But neither logistics nor the number of the cast had anything to do with the startling reduction of the king to a mere voice-over, and the voice of a young woman at that. One could easily see the director's point in removing the king physically from the scene: the king in the play, despite his spiritual superiority, is too ugly to look at and always shrouds himself in darkness whenever he meets his beautiful queen; and since it is easier to imagine spiritual beauty in the absence of an unsightly physical presence, the director saw fit to remove it. But giving the king a female voice, a kind of androgynous denomination and confusing his gender in the name of 'spiritualizing' him was going a bit too far. Still, it was a teasing and exciting proposition, particularly in view of the production's policy of playing up the religious and mystical aspects of the text at the cost of the romantic ones. By the end of the performance, the king has been metaphorically built up into some kind of omniscient, omnipotent and omnipresent deity; to hear this invisible deity speak with a female voice would thrill any feminist; but since director Samih Mugahid would not have him (her?) rejoin the queen in a final, romantic reconciliation in which physicality and spirituality are held in perfect equipoise — as Tagore intended — he replaced the scene with a choral confessional prayer in which all the characters join.

Mugahid's interpretation and many alterations are bound to arouse a lot of controversy. Some will say that the play has gained in focus, concentration and spiritual impact because of them; others may judge that they have adulterated Tagore's vision and twisted it out of all recognition. Few, however, will dispute the technical proficiency of the production. In this respect, the flexible seating arrangement of Al-Ghad theatre and the audience's comfortable swivel-chairs were an asset. There, you can seat the audience anywhere you like and set up your performance area, or areas, wherever you choose. It is a free space, capable of being shaped and reshaped infinitely without losing the virtue of intimacy. Such a free space was crucial for a performance that required bare platforms, multiple settings, the minimum of highly symbolic props and, above all, room for movement.

For this production, director Mugahid chose to seat his audience on the two long sides of the triangular hall, creating a kind of traverse theatre. On either end of the hall were raised platforms, fitted with minimal symbolic scenery, representing several locales. In the middle passageway, traversing the area between the audience's seats, a black, linoleum square, representing the King's dark chamber, and edged with burning white light, gave way to an empty, unlocalized area that signified the crossing of all borders — physical and spiritual. The acting was generally good and highly disciplined, but could have done with a touch of stylization. The weakest point in this respect was Samir Wahid's performance of the crucial part of the clown who masquarades as the king in the early carnival scenes; his antics were belaboured and heavy-handed, and at times it felt as if he was bludgeoning us into laughter. Another feeble element was the choreography of the dances which was characterless, lacklustre and embarrassingly naive. But the

most damaging element of all was the music; Walid El-Shahawi's recorded score, though good in itself, was light years removed from the atmosphere of the play. A few percussion instruments, played live, would have done the job more efficiently. Still, on balance, the rewards of the evening far outnumbered its disappointment. At least, Tagore has finally been added to the repertory of the Egyptian theatre.

Wole Soyinka's *The Lion and the Jewel* at Al-Hanager*

At Al-Hanager, in the mock-heroic world of Wole Soyinka's *The Lion and the Jewel*, we encounter a primitive chief, the lecherous Baroka who, unlike Gilgamesh in the old Akkadian epic, seeks immortality in the accumulation of wives and offspring. When Sidi, the village belle, repels his advances, he resorts to cunning and tricks her into visiting him by putting out a rumour through the oldest of his wives that aging has made him impotent. The old wife's gloating over her husband's impotence (deliciously rendered by Salwa Mohamed Ali) is short-lived, and her plan to humiliate him sexually with the help of Sidi, to whom she divulges his secret confession of impotence, boomerangs. The play ends with Sidi completely conquered by both Baroka's eloquence and his virility.

Drawing on many of the resources of popular theatre, director Ahmed Abdel-Galeel presented Nasim Migalli's elegant translation of the play as a musical comedy, with an excellent team of African dancers from Southern Sudan and a vibrant score by Tarek Sharara which mixed African chants and drumming with atmospheric sound-effects. And as if that was not enough, set-designer Sobhi El-Sayed turned the stage into a veritable forest of African masks. But despite the hilarious antics of the characters, the boisterous vitality of the performers, and the colourful exuberance of the spectacle, Baroka's triumph at the end made me feel uncomfortable. Did I detect a whiff of male chauvinism somewhere?

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* 22.4.1999. In Arabic.

Slowly but Surely

A new dawn at Fajr Festival in Tehran*

When the pilot announced we were about to land at Tehran airport there was a sudden, intense flurry of activity. Many passengers started calling the stewards and stewardesses for a final drink before the big drought and most of the women were frantically reaching into their hand-bags for scarves, shawls and abayas. Vanya Exerjian, Madiha and Layla, the three female performers accomanying Al-Warsha — the first Egyptian theatre troupe ever to visit Iran — were hardly recognisable. Clad in folds of voluminous black from top to toe they needed, as one male member of the group noted, tags to identify them. Thoughtful Vanya, having known me for years, had brought along an extra abaya in case the absent-minded professor had forgotten exactly where she was going. Luckily, my daughter had consulted a web site which listed the do's and don'ts for prospective Iran visitors. Black was not mandatory, it said: all that was required was that women should be completely and loosely covered except for the face and hands. The colour of the cover was unspecified. When I emerged from the plane, I was in a baggy, ankle-length coat which I kept tripping over and a printed silk scarf which kept slipping dangerously backwards though tightly knotted under the chin and carefully fastened with pins. German critic Renate Klett, another guest of the festival, told me later at the hotel that she had rehearsed with the scarf for a whole week at home, keeping it on all the time. I wished I had done the same.

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* 22.2.2001.

I also wished somebody had warned me that men and women were not supposed to shake hands in Iran. Outside the airport we were met by a lot of people from the Iranian Ministry of Culture and Dramatic Arts Centre. Also waiting for us was Egyptian consul Yusef Mekkawi who, together with ambassador Mohamed Rifa'a (the grandson of Rifa'a El-Tahtawi, that most enlightened of Azharite 'Ulemas in 19th century Egypt), runs the Egyptian interests bureau in Tehran. Feeling a bit tense and insecure in my new getup — like an actress thrust on stage in an awkward, complicated costume without a dress rehearsal — I needed the reassurance of a friendly hand. I eagerly shook hands with the Egyptian consul and his companion and proceeded to do likewise with our Iranian hosts. It took me a few seconds to realise that my hand was hanging in mid-air and quickly stuffed the offending limb in my pocket.

In the special car assigned for me (an unwelcome honour at that moment since in my confused, embarrassed state I badly needed the company and comfort of my Al-Warsha friends), my escort asked politely, in a sheepish whisper, if I would please cover my hair. I hastily pulled the front of my scarf forward and down until it nearly covered my eyes; but, "no ... no," he said, pointing his finger to the back of my head. It transpired that an errant lock of hair had managed to break loose and creep unnoticed an inch or two under the tip of the scarf to peep at the world outside. I soon discovered that in certain circles in Tehran, educated women had wrested for themselves the right to bare a part of the top of their heads to the sky.

When I finally retired to my room at Ferdossi hotel that evening, after studying the festival programme with my escort and deciding with

his help which plays I should see, I was thoroughly exhausted but could not sleep. I lay in bed trying to get over that novel and disorienting feeling that I and my body were two separate entities, wondering what the performances would be like in view of the four crippling provisos imposed by the festival. The first was, as in real life, that all female performers should observe the Islamic dress regardless of any artistic considerations and whatever the play. Lucky for Hassan El-Gretly and his Al-Warsha group that their *Spinning Lives*, which dramatises the first part of the popular epic known as *Al-Sira Al-Hilaleya*, artistically requires types of costume which fulfill this condition. In the case of the three productions of Sophocles's *Antigone*, from Germany, Greece and Iran, a local production of *Medea* and another of *Macbeth*, I foresaw no problems since the setting in all of them could easily accommodate the veil, might even require it, and the texts were originally performed, both in ancient Greece and Elizabethan England, without women altogether. As for the Swiss *Memories*, written and directed by Otto Kukla, which I had seen in Germany last year, nothing needed to be done except dress the two female performers in scarves and long dresses; it consists of film projections, live music and reading and contains minimal movement. It could come across almost intact.

My imagination ground to a halt when I reached Sierra Leone's *Stubbornness* in my musings. Billed as a dance drama with live drumming and male and female dancers, it not only posed the question of how to dress the African female dancers according to the first proviso without impeding their movement or sacrificing its local colour, but struck me as an open and flagrant violation of the second festival proviso which strictly forbids female dancing on stage. No female solo

singing on stage either, the third proviso stipulates, while the fourth bans any physical contact whatsoever between male and female performers, not even a handshake. I pitied the two actors burdened with the parts of Caligula and his mistress, Caesonia, in an Iranian adaptation of Camus' *Caligula* listed in the programme. They could avoid touching throughout the whole play and the audience could accept it as a theatrical convention; but how could Caligula manage the strangulation of Caesonia at the end, as he is supposed to do, without touching her? That was the question. I fell asleep trying to puzzle it out.

That mystery still remains unsolved; a couple of days later I went to see the play, but within 25 minutes I decided I had had enough of prim, wooden Caesonia and of raving, ranting Caligula and did not care what happened to them at the end. I sneaked out at the first opportune moment with my faithful and diligent escort, Rijan, close at my heels. But the choice of leaving performances halfway through, either because they grew tedious once you were told the plot, seeming to belong more to the tradition of TV drama than to theatre, or simply because you wanted to catch another highly recommended performnce, was not always available. It was possible in the case of *Caligula* because it took place in the largest of five small halls which, together with a main hall which seats 579, dozens of offices, a veritable maze of corridors and narrow stairways, and a cafeteria in the basement (called artists' café), constitute The City Theatre Complex in the centre of Teheran. It is a round, imposing and architecturally impressive building and throughout the festival it drew thousands of Iranians, the majority young men and women, eager to enjoy theatre, foreign and local, and, possibly, to gauge the level of freedom they have by what was being allowed on stage.

To my surprise, and relief, I soon discovered that the president of this year's festival (the 19th since it started and third since it went international), Dr. Majid Sharif Khodai and his team of organisers allowed theatre more freedom than one had ever expected or dared hope for — more freedom than any previous year, according to many Iranians. The regulations forbidding female dancing and singing were bravely bent in the case of Sierra Leone's *Stubbornness* and two other stunngingly daring (by Iranian standards) local productions. The first *Puff*, a translation of a feminist play by an American woman playwright (whose name I failed to discover) was rendered into Farsi and directed by the late H. Hesami; it was the first play he was allowed to direct after a 20-year-long ban and also his last; he died just before the festival when it was due to open. This sad story may partly explain the spirit of reckless defiance which permeates the whole performance and its electrifying impact on its Iranian audience. But even among foreigners, it proved a huge success and an exhilarating theatrical experience. At once serious and hilariously funny, it portrays a middle-aged, long-oppressed and battered housewife who, at the end of her tether, screams in the face of her husband for the first time in her life, wishing him to hell. Something goes "puff" as the lights go out and we see sparks and smoke. When they come on again, we see in his place a small pile of ashes and his spectacles. This sequence, performed in the style of the old silent movies, takes up a very short time, and the rest of the play shows the woman slowly grasping, with the help of a nighbour, another oppressed wife, and two bottles of wine, her new-found freedom, her growing self-confidence and a new and thrilling awareness of her body. When her body begins to move involuntarily to the rhythm of music, she jumps up crying out, in an overwhelming

burst of joy and energy, "I can dance." And she actually does, and with great gusto and abandon, grinning at the audience all the time and waving to it to join her. The rapport actress G. Adine established with the audience is hard to describe and was a clear sign of a passionate longing for freedom. The play ends happily with another curse, another puff which, this time, dispatches the brutal husband of the neighbour safely to hell.

At Sangelaj Theatre, which occupies a separate small building away from the City Theatre Complex, and facing a lovely, rambling park, I watched the other Iranian performance which broke the taboo against female singing and dancing. *Three Stories from the Arabian Nights* is a bold and technically polished one-woman show, written and directed by Hassan-E-Khalilifar and superbly acted by Jayran Momken. It conjures up three unfortunate female characters from the *Nights* and replays their tragic stories in the present: a young girl forcibly married to an old man who rapes her then dies the same night; an unmarried middle-aged woman longing for love and battling against loneliness and social taboos; and finally, a young woman forced by society into prostitution and setting herself ablaze at the end to escape her sordid life. Such topics, normal in many countries and old-fashioned, perhaps, are novel and even shocking in post-revolution Iranian theatre. Also novel and exciting is the use of body language to build a visual, rebellious and cunningly subversive subtext which says more than the verbal text dares to say and speaks of the unspeakable. Though I was given only a bare outline of the stories, and could not make out a word of what Ms. Momken was saying, she managed, through her masterful control of her body and voice and her amazing emotional mobility, to speak volumes to me.

There were other one-woman shows in the festival, all Iranian all — like *Bahjat* (performed by Elika Abdorrazaqi) which portrays the ordeal of a woman on the run from her monstrous husband — centering on the suffering of women in oppressive patriarchal societies. It was invigorating to find so many actresses defending the cause of women and protesting against the violation of their human rights. If we add to these solo performances the ones written, directed or acted exclusively by women, the 19th Fajr festival aquires a definite and pronounced feminist slant.

Nameless Maria is one of the finest products of this positive trend. Based on a poignant text by Croatian writer Lydia Skorman Horak which details the horrors suffered by women in war, especially rape, it had a cast of two women and was sensitively and poetically directed by Narjis Hashempour, herself an actress, who managed to preserve the anguished honesty of the original play while avoiding its most dangerous pitfalls. Rape surfaced again in *When We Return* — an unusual and exciting play about guilt, remorse, broken dreams and impossible longings, set in the countryside of Shiraz where its makers live. It used repetition in an intriguing manner to split and merge the characters, adopted an episodic inconsequential structure and was on the whole surrealist in mode. In a memorable scene, it presented in succession two deranged women in identical clothing, both looking for a missing cow, wearing cow-bells round their necks and accusing the same man, who once kidnapped and raped a bride, of having milked them dry. My escort described the show as erotic and pornographic. I was startled and thought he was either joking or did not know the meaning of the words he used. I carefully reviewed the play in my mind's eye, but hard as I tried I could not discover any detail that was

even remotely erotic or to which the word pornography could conceivably apply. Even the role of the seductive gypsy who waylays farmers on their way home to help her partner steal their cattle was played by a man in drag. My escort later explained that he had meant the verbal text by his description and not the performance and that any reference to sex, however oblique, was generally viewed as erotic. I instantly remembered how Hassan El-Gretly, who had used the word adultery in his synopsis of *Spinning Lives*, was asked to replace it with a less offensive term.

The word experimental, too has a different meaning in Iran, at least among laymen. When I heard the use of live music in theatre described as experimental, I simply gaped. What's experimental about that, I asked? "It was allowed only three years ago," was the answer.

By the same criterion one could describe as experimental the moment when the long, thick and heavy wig worn by the heroine of *Burnt Temple* slipped off when she accidentally sat on it, revealing her real hair and causing the audience to gasp in chorus. Indeed, the genuine excitement and suspense caused by that trivial incident would be hard to match in any experimental theatre.

Of the 23 Iranian plays I saw, *Stardust-Stricken* (subtitled *Without Dialogue*) struck me as the most ambitiously experimental in most respects. The script, by Atila Psyani and Mohammad Charmshir, draws on many sources: William Gibson's *Miracle Worker* which dramatises the relationship of Helen Keller to her teacher Annie Sullivan; Peter Handke's *Kaspar*; Eugene Ionesco's *The Lesson*; and Sophocles's *Antigone* (a play that seemed to haunt the festival). At the centre of all four plays is a conflict between a pupil and a teacher, involving ideas of

obedience and rebellion and the meaning of education. Pesyani, who also directed, used Gibson's play as frame and starting point then set about twisting it at every step by roping in characters, details and ideas from the other three plays. The gradual and subtle transformation of Keller and her teacher into victim and persecutor, and the switching of roles at the end, brilliantly performed and orchestrated by Fatima Naqavi and Setare Pesyani, was at once fascinating and terrifying. As the play progressed, the concept of education was redefined as a process of systematic conditioning, involving torture, terrorisation and physical brutality, and designed to break the will, inculcate obedience, stifle natural feelings and obliterate individuality and difference.

Encased in a drab wire cage, and constantly flooded with images flashing on two screens, pupil and teacher grow more savage and violent; the torment can only end if one of them dies. But here, unlike *Kaspar*, *The Lesson*, or *Antigone*, it is not the young who die. Helpless, blind, deaf and dumb Keller stabs her teacher, wrenches away part of the wire screen isolating her from the audience and steps out in a pool of light to the tune of an American pop song. The sense of relief and liberation at that moment, after the oppressive gloom, the relentless cruelty and harrowing scenes, was very much like an intimation of a new dawn.

All the World a Movie

Carlos Fuentes at Al-Hanager*

I confess I have a pathetically inadequate background in American and European cinema, especially when it comes to films produced in the 1940s and 50s and, therefore, am the least qualified person to winnow the facts from the fiction in *Orchids in the Moonlight (Orcadia en la luz de luna)* — an intriguing play by Mexican novelist and dramatist, Carlos Fuentes, that has recently made its way, through an adaptation, to the stage of Al-Hanager. Featuring two Mexican film stars, Maria Felix and Delores del Rio, who hit the international film scene round the mid-20th century, in Paris and Hollywood respectively, it is set in Venice, which, in the play, comes across as a bewildering, teasing fabrication, vividly reminiscent of Thomas Mann's sombre, decadent, disease-ridden city, in his haunting *Death in Venice*. There, the two aged actresses have retired to wait for the final exit, whiling away the time with eerie fantasies, play-acting and remembrances of glories past.

The play opens on the day following the death of Orson Welles who, according to Fuentes's fictional Felix, was one of del Rio's lovers. But instead of regaling us with spicy details of their amorous adventures, the play keeps us puzzling why Delores insists on avoiding the subject and is so anxious to hide the newspaper bearing his obituary lest their mother should see it. Now, this mother is another mystery; she is somewhere upstairs, enjoys eternal youth, has been a friend of

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* 21.6.2001. In Arabic.

Welles herself, and fears nothing more than the death of her contemporaries. Both actresses maintain she will outlive them — indeed, will outlive her own death. The word symbol kept flashing across the pages as I read, and in my frantic casting about for an explanation, I kept stumbling over Thomas Mann's favourite theme of the artist as both misfit and charlatan.

More confusing still were the insistent references to films done by both actresses which, needless to say, I have not seen, do not even know if they really existed, but which I could not help feeling had some bearing on the bizarre ongoings on stage. Did they hold the clue to the identity of the invisible, almost legendary mother? I wondered; or should one simply forget about questions of identity in this bizarre, make-believe world and accept her as a fiction, a figment of the two actresses' imagination or, possibly, a symbol of the glamorous film star, eternally fixed on the screen in all her youth and beauty, beyond the reach of time and its ravages?

Given the quasi-surrealistic mode of writing — elegantly dubbed by critics as magical realism — typical of Fuentes's work (in one of his novels, an illegitimate son goes round the countryside looking for his father and ends up having a man in every village claiming to be the object of the quest), one could never be sure whether the two aged women on stage were the people they said they were (they constantly pester each other for mutual confirmation of their identities), were living in Venice or California (since both cities are alternately and interchangeably used to refer to the setting), or make up one's mind about the theatrical death of Maria (gorgeously dressed as Cleopatra and surrounded by an opulent royal retinue who materialise out of the blue

to aid her death and perform her obsequies) or the story of Delores murdering the nosy, meddlesome journalist at the end.

Since the Arabic translation of the play, via a French version of the original Spanish text, is far from accurate, with lots of ambiguous pronouns and gender declensions, one could easily understand, and readily sympathise, with Nabil Badran's predicament when he was handed this translation and asked to make an intelligible, accessible Egyptian script out of it. The culprit was actress and popular comedian Sanaa Younis who was made a gift of the translation by its perpetrator while on a trip to Jordan. She had just experienced the tragic loss of her mother — not just a mother, but a lifelong friend and companion — and, in her shock and grief, decided to quit acting and wear the veil. She thought it would be nice to do just one more play, her last, a kind of swan song in which to review her life and career, and *Orchids*, with extensive rewriting, of course, seemed a godsend. She entrusted it to playwright and theatre critic Nabil Badran, whose favourite dramatic form is political cabaret and who, by temperament, has no patience with poetic ambiguities or prevarication, under whatever guise, any formal conundrums of any kind, and little sympathy with what stolid machismos would call, silly female emotional writhings.

Consequently, he tailored the text to his own liking, ironing out its tantalising contradictions and setting it squarely on firm, rational grounds. The mysterious mother upstairs was the first to go; she would only obfuscate the audience. Then the paradoxical features of the two actresses were sorted out and freshly shared out between them to create credible stage characters, or, to be more accurate, recognisable stereotypes of the aged, retired film star. Delores del Rio becomes

Shalabiya, or Shushu, the young peasant woman who escapes to the capital to seek her fortune, goes through several men as wife, mistress and one-night pickup, mothering a son on the way, before making it to stardom; and Maria Felix becomes Lulu, a lower middle-class Copt, who starts out as a belly dancer, sleeping around with all and sundry, then works up her way to stardom, sacrificing in the process the one true love in her life. Any hint of lesbianism (such as Maria fondly caressing and kissing Delores's bare foot at the beginning) was, predictably, firmly excised, with the result that certain patches in the dialogue that were retained became extremely puzzling and, on occasions, mischievously suggestive. To square things, a male character was added to play all the men in the two women's lives, and Shushu's neglected son was dragged out of the shadowy vaults of her memory and lugubriously thrust on stage to haunt and reprimand her in a style befitting the most lachrymose of melodramas. For dressing, Badran added a touch of topical relevance by alluding to the widely publicised row over the buying by Arabs of the originals of old Egyptian movies and monopolising the right of distributing and broadcasting them, and by replacing the two satirical altars Fuentes plants in his set, which bear the trophies, photos and relics of the two stars' careers, with real religious altars, bearing the symbols of Christianity and Islam, to affirm the unity and harmony of the two faiths in Egypt.

But such and other melodramatic trappings were only a ruse; the whole was cast in the delightful mould of parody and Badran's text made no attempt to disguise it. Indeed, it went all out to impress upon the audience the utter theatricality of the whole affair and to invite their laughter. No wonder Sanaa Younis rejected the script and withdrew

from the project. She had wanted a swan song and Badran gave her a parody of one. Her role fell to Sawsan Badr, but, at least, one could seek comfort in the fact that after this debacle, Younis was so angry and frustrated that she forgot all about retiring and the veil and has embarked on a feverish search for another play.

In staging the play, director Hisham Gom'a and his crew and cast — Ibrahim El-Fawi (set); Walid El-Shahawi (music); Mohamed Abdel-Raziq (video); Sawsan Badr (Shushu); Sahar Rami (Lulu); Sami Maghawri (the men in their lives); Yasser Farag (the nosy, hapless journalist); and Karim Sami (the deserted son) — opted for open theatricality and burlesque in every visual and vocal detail. The stage, draped all round in tattered, off-white gauze curtains, was suitably cluttered with rocking chairs, chests, clothes hangers, a huge dressing mirror framed with bulbs, a table and chairs, and divided into two levels, with a huge screen at the back for video projections. On the raised stage, in the rear area, Badr and Rami performed scenes from their former lives in a manner that recalled similar famous scenes in old Egyptian movies. No one could possibly take them seriously. My initial embarrassment at the first line in the play, ceremoniously uttered by Badr ("Now, tell me about the men in your life.") soon evaporated in the sizzling heat of the comic scenes that followed. "My God, how could any one start a play like that?" I had said to myself, squirming in my chair with disbelief at the beginning. Within a few minutes, I was swept along by the spirit of ruthless, rollicking parody and asked no more questions.

The Days of Lulu and Shushu may not be, is definitely not, Fuentes's *Orchids in the Moonlight*; and it could reasonably be accused

of being harsh, unfair to the thespian tribe, too direct and, possibly, too simplistic in dealing with the problems of identity and gender roles and duties; but it is at least funny and entertaining and has fitful flashes of warm human sympathy for the solidarity of women and the passing away of youth and beauty.

Three Argentinian Tales
at Al-Hanager*

At Al-Hanager, the sight of Iraqi director, Qasim Mohamed, now living in the United Arab Emirates and pining to go home, was a poignant reminder of the war on Iraq, the horrors that led to it and the sorrows it has left in its wake. Like his last year's *Risalat Al-Teyr*, which he adapted from the famous allegorical poem, *Manteq Al-Teyr* (Eng. trans., The Conference of Birds) by the 12th Century Persian mystical poet and thinker, Farid Eddin Attar, his current *Stories from the Alleyways of the Third World* is also an adaptation and the fruit of a workshop with young actors organised by Al-Hanager.

This time, however, Mohamed went to Latin America for inspiration and picked two of three short plays published by Argentinean writer Osvaldo Dragun in 1957 under the title *Three Tales to be Told* (Historias para ce contadas). Dragun' *The Man Who Became a Dog* and *The Story of our Friend Bangitto Gonzales who Felt Responsible for an Outbreak of Bubonic Plague in South Africa* were knocked together, so to speak, slightly altered, and then rebuilt into one text with two parallel plots, alternating scenes and points of intersection. One plot shows a man taking on the job of a watch-dog at a factory when he fails to find any other work and ending up behaving exactly like a dog and living in a kennel. In the second, another poor man, also jobless, but with the added burden of half a dozen kids to feed, is lured by a fat salary to cooperate with a multi-national company

* 7.8.2003. In Arabic.

to market rotten, rat meat in the poor Third World. The company makes fat profits and he thrives for a while. But when the company's products cause an outbreak of bubonic plague in South Africa, he becomes the natural scapegoat and is solely held responsible. He ends up back on the streets, but this time shamed and disgraced, with neither home nor family.

In Qasim Mohamed's adaptation, the two stories shared the same setting — an alleyway in a slum in South Africa — and offer two alternating variations on the theme of the gradual erosion of people's humanity under the pressure of poverty, greed and rabid exploitation. Adopting a style of performance inspired by both Brecht's epic theatre and Augusto Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed, Mohamed kept the stage austerely bare, divided it into two separate platforms, with a long catwalk in the middle, jutting out well into the auditorium. On each platform, four actors, three men and a woman, alternately used narration, impersonation and comment to unfold the story assigned to them. There were no sets, only boxes to serve as seats, a desk which when turned round became a kennel, while a poem by Brecht, painted in big, black letters on a large, white screen served as a backdrop. There was no music either, and of props and accessories, there was the bare minimum — a stick, a cardboard cutout tree and moon, some glasses and a few coats and scarves to mark changes in character. Everything depended on the performers' ability to quickly slip in and out of parts and moods, and to tell their stories neutrally, comment on them detachedly, as well as act them out to the most intimate depths. With such a stark text and no visual frills, it's a wonder how this show manages to touch people so profoundly, address them so intimately, moving them at once to laughter and to tears.

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